Natural Heritage &
Endangered Species
Program

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Division of Fisheries & Wildlife
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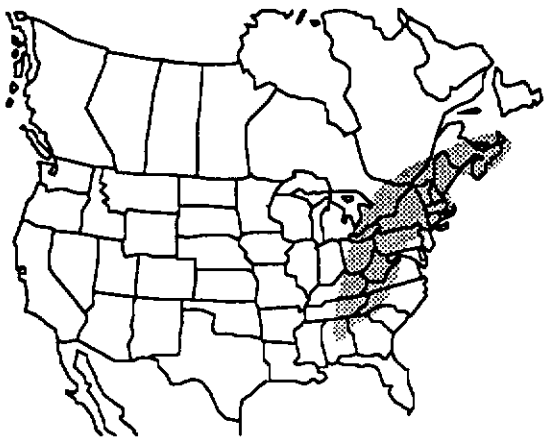
MASSACHUSETTS THREATENED PLANTS

GREAT LAUREL
(*Rhododendron maximum* L.)

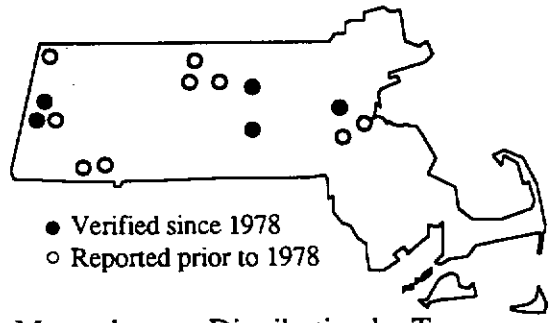
Description

Great Laurel, a member of the Heath family (Ericaceae) is an evergreen shrub or small tree that grows up to 10 m (33 ft.) high. Its 1-2 dm (3 - 8 in.) long leaves are smooth-margined, alternate, leathery, and, usually, widest above the middle. In addition, the leaves are dark green above and paler green and pubescent (hairy) beneath. The young branchlets are pubescent, as well. Great Laurel's pink to white flowers are on sticky pedicels (flower stalks) and clustered in dome-shaped, terminal inflorescences. Each 3.5-4 cm (1 3/5 - 1 2/5 in.) long flower is subtended by a short, five-lobed calyx (outermost floral whorl) and is spotted with yellow or orange on its inner surface. The fruit is a 10 - 15 mm (10/25 -

Gleason, H.A. The New Britton and Brown Illustrated Flora of the US & Adjacent Canada. NY Botanical Garden, 1952.



Documented Range of Great Laurel



Massachusetts Distribution by Town

15/25 in.) long, five-chambered, septicidal capsule (a dry fruit derived from a compound pistil that opens along the walls or "septa" dividing the various ovaries). Great Laurel prefers filtered light and flowers from late June to late July.

Range

The range of Great Laurel has been documented as extending from Nova Scotia to southern Ontario and Ohio, south to Georgia and Alabama.

Similar Species

Great Laurel could be confused with Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). In contrast to Great Laurel, however, Mountain Laurel has flowers that are marked with purple. Furthermore, its hairless leaves are shorter--only 5-8 cm (2 - 3 1/6 in.) compared to the 10-20 cm (4 - 8 in.) of Great Laurel.

Habitat in Massachusetts

Great Laurel is a plant of moist woods, swamps, and the edges of ponds. Its habitats in Massachusetts include the edge of a boggy swamp; an Atlantic White Cedar swamp, near an open pond; a forested seepage fen (a peat-forming area where very cold, nutrient-poor water seeps to the surface); and the edge of a Red Maple swamp. Among the plant species associated with Great Laurel are Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*), Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), Yellow Birch (*Betula lutea*), Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), Cinnamon Fern (*Osmunda cinnamonea*), and White Pine (*Pinus strobus*). Associated, rare Massachusetts plants include Swamp Red Currant (*Ribes triste*) and Hemlock Parsley (*Conioselinum chinense*).

Population Status

Great Laurel is presently listed as "Threatened" in Massachusetts, where there are six current stations (discovered or relocated since 1978) in five towns and nine historical stations (unverified since 1978). Great Laurel is also considered rare in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and Ohio. Threats include--especially in the past--collecting for home landscaping.