



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Climbing Fern *Lygodium palmatum* (Bernh.) Sw.

State Status: **Special Concern**
Federal Status: **None**

DESCRIPTION: Climbing Fern does not have the characteristic overall shape of most ferns. It is an evergreen, ivy-like plant which sprawls over the ground or climbs clockwise short distances up shrubs and coarse herbs. In very favorable conditions, Climbing Fern may carpet up to an acre of more of the forest floor. The rootstalk is black, wiry, widely creeping, and branching. The root sends up a row of twining delicate fronds to a height of 3-5 ft. (0.9-1.5 m). The pinnae (fern equivalent of leaflets) are a forking stalk, each stalk ending in a palmately lobed yellow-green blade about 2 in (3-6 cm) across. The fertile blades are tiny, palmate, and produce spores on the underside. The gross morphology of this fern distinguishes it from any other species in Massachusetts.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: Climbing Fern grows in moist pine-oak-maple woods with an open understory, in moist thickets, and along stream margins. This plant prefers acidic soils that are sandy and rich in humus, but nutrient-poor. Regenerating woodlands and powerline corridors also provide habitat for this species in Massachusetts.

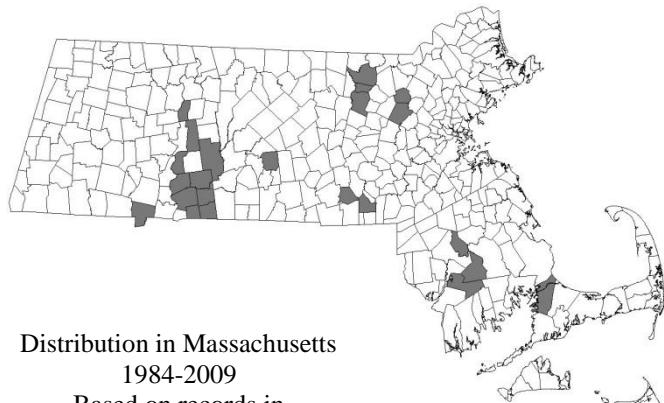


Photo by Bruce Sorrie, NHESP

RANGE: Climbing Fern occurs from southern New Hampshire and northwestern Vermont west to Michigan, and south to Georgia and Alabama.

POPULATION STATUS: Climbing Fern is a Species of Special Concern in Massachusetts. It is considered rare in New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, and Michigan. It was known

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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historically from Delaware and Washington, DC. There are 34 current sites (since 1984) in Massachusetts for Climbing Fern, and 27 additional historical (before 1984) locations.

In the 1800s, when Climbing Fern was much more common, it was very popular as a decoration and commercial collection contributed to its decline. The first plant protection law was passed in Connecticut in 1869 specifically to protect this species. Legal protection helped alleviate the collection problem. However, loss of habitat through expansion of agriculture and development continued as the major factor contributing to the species decline.

Although Climbing Fern may be abundant where it is found, populations are rare and localized. Climbing Fern continues to decline in Massachusetts due to loss of habitat through draining and filling of wetlands, land development projects, and the maturation of woodlands. Seemingly appropriate habitat for Climbing Fern is fairly common in Massachusetts; however, for unknown reasons, Climbing Fern occurs in only a very few of these areas.

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