



**Natural Heritage  
& Endangered Species  
Program**

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*Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife*

**Black Cohosh  
*Actaea racemosa* L.**

State Status: **Endangered**  
Federal Status: **None**

**DESCRIPTION:** Black Cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*, formerly *Cimicifuga racemosa*) is a striking herbaceous perennial plant of the buttercup family (Ranunculaceae), with alternate, compound leaves and four to nine malodorous, wand-like, white inflorescences. Though indigenous to rich woodlands, Black Cohosh is also a common garden and herbal medicinal plant, and goes by the other common names Black Snakeroot, Squawroot, and Bugbane.

**AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION:** The leaves of Black Cohosh are 15 to 60 cm (~6–23 in.) in length, smooth, and two to three times “ternately” (i.e., divided in three) compound, with 20 to 70 toothed leaflets. The flowering stem can be quite tall, reaching up to 2.5 m (~8 ft.) in height; it is branched, with several racemes of fetid, white flowers. Individual flowers appear as a mass of stamens with white filaments 5 to 10 mm long, topped by rounded anthers. The fruit is a thick-walled follicle, 5 to 10 mm in size.

**SIMILAR SPECIES:** The leaves of Black Cohosh resemble those of Red Baneberry (*Actaea rubra*), and White Baneberry (*Actaea pachypoda*). Like Black Cohosh, baneberries are known from rich woodlands and have compound leaves with toothed leaflets, but they are typically much smaller plants. The most distinguishing characters are the inflorescence and the fruit; in baneberries, the inflorescence is an unbranched raceme, and the fruit are berries, not follicles.

**HABITAT:** In Massachusetts, Black Cohosh inhabits very rich deciduous forests typically with moist alkaline soils. Associated canopy species include Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*), Red Maple (*A. rubrum*), Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*), Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), and White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*). Subcanopy and understory woody plants include hazelnut (*Corylus americana*), Ironwood (*Carpinus*



*Black Cohosh photos: Top, inflorescence with leaves, J. Coddington.  
Bottom, plant with tall flowering stalk in habitat: B.A. Sorrie, NHESP.*

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

**Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife**

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Please allow the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program to continue to conserve the biodiversity of Massachusetts with a contribution for ‘endangered wildlife conservation’ on your state income tax form, as these donations comprise a significant portion of our operating budget.

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*caroliniana*), Maple-leaved Viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*), Witch-hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), and Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*). Associated herbs include Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), Sensitive Fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*), Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*), wood ferns (*Dryopteris* spp.), Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), and Blue Cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*).

**FLOWERING TIME IN MASSACHUSETTS:**

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

**RANGE:** Black Cohosh is indigenous to eastern North America from Massachusetts and New York, south to Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, and west to Ontario, Michigan, Iowa, Missouri and Arkansas. Only historic occurrences are known from Michigan and Iowa. It has been introduced in Maine.



Distribution in Massachusetts  
1985 - 2010  
Based on records in the  
Natural Heritage Database

**POPULATION STATUS:** Black Cohosh is listed under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act as Endangered. All listed species are protected from killing, collecting, possessing, or sale and from activities that would destroy habitat and thus directly or indirectly cause mortality or disrupt critical behaviors. It is currently known from Berkshire and Franklin Counties, and is historically known from Hampden, Hampshire, and Worcester Counties.

**THREATS AND MANAGEMENT**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Potential threats include competition from invasive species and physical damage from logging, motorized vehicles, and deer browse. Black Cohosh populations should be monitored periodically to assess these threats and determine if there are management needs. A primary threat to this species is competition from exotic invasive species, such as Japanese Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*), Asiatic Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), and Morrow’s Honeysuckle (*Lonicera morrowii*). Though Black Cohosh is vigorous in higher light conditions, increases in light and soil disturbance (e.g., due to tree harvest) can also increase the vigor and competitive edge of exotic plants. Therefore plans for tree removal or other projects in or near Black Cohosh habitat that increase light and disturb soil should include strategies to reduce sources of invasive plant introduction (e.g., contaminated machinery) and their spread. Black Cohosh plants in deep shade that are not flowering might benefit from some light canopy pruning. Access to Black Cohosh habitat with motorized vehicles should be prohibited. All active management of state-listed plant populations (including invasive species removal) is subject to review under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act, and should be planned in close consultation with the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program.

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