



## American cancer-root (*Conopholis americana*) - Parasitic Pinecone



### Did you know? American cancer-root

- is part of the Broomrape (Orobanchaceae) family
- Have flowers with no scent but pollinators such as bees still enjoy the nectar
- Is a favorite snack of Bears

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**Habitat:** Interior forests underneath deciduous trees, particularly Oaks, wooded ravines

**Blooms:** May - July

**Status:** Sensitive, S4 (what does this S-rank mean?)

<http://nhic.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/glossary/srank.cfm>

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### Identification:

Small-sized plant (7 - 20 cm tall) with scaly yellow/brown stalks or spiklets erupting from the soil. The plant has no leaves and inconspicuous hooded yellowish to light brown flowers. As the flowering spike matures and begins to wither it slowly turns brown throughout the summer than black and shriveled in the winter months.

Blooms between May & July and each flower is replaced by a white seed capsule which holds many seeds.

**Range:** Found throughout eastern United States and Canada from Florida to the northern areas of Manitoba, Quebec and Ontario. Prefers partial shade in well drained forests.



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### Interesting Facts:

Like all members of the Broomrape family, the American cancer-root contains no chlorophyll. It obtains its nutrients from a host plant as a parasite on the root structures of the host trees, mainly oaks. This parasitic activity generally does not affect the health of the host tree, as the nutrient extraction is relatively minor and the number of individual American cancer-root shoots is not extensive. The suckers of the parasitic roots cause the formation of little rounded knobs on the roots of the host tree.

When an American cancer-root seed germinates, it doesn't grow upwards towards the sunlight but it actually squirms farther underground in search of its nourishment. It "searches" in the dark until it finds the root of an oak or beech tree and attaches to feed off of the root system of its host tree.

The plants main body is underground with only the flowering parts emerging from the soil to produce the seeds.





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### **American cancer-root on the Niagara Escarpment**

Look for the unassuming spikelets of American cancer-root sprouting up on deciduous forest floors underneath the majestic Oaks and Beech trees all along the Escarpment.

If you are lucky enough to stumble upon a cluster in bloom you will be presented with a strange sight of what looks to be pine cones sticking out of the forest floor.

With its abundance of deciduous forests, wooded ravines and slopes and moist environments, the Niagara Escarpment supports ideal habitats for clusters of these leafless plants .

American cancer-root is an uncommon plant but not provincially or nationally rare. It is however sensitive to disturbance and has particular habitat requirements.

The BTC is acquiring and stewarding Niagara Escarpment land so that the Escarpment will continue to support species like American cancer-root.