

Box Huckleberry (*Gaylussacia brachycera*)

Pennsylvania Endangered Plant Species

State Rank: S1 (critically imperiled), Global Rank: G3 (vulnerable)

Identification

Box huckleberry is a low shrub with branches that rise to about one foot from underground, creeping stems, known as rhizomes. Its glossy, leathery leaves lack the resinous dots of other huckleberries, and it holds its leaves year-round while the others are deciduous. Its flowers, white or pinkish, are bell-shaped. Fruits are similar to blueberries, but have fewer, larger seeds.

Biology-Natural History

Box huckleberry is a long-lived perennial that belongs to the Heath Family (Ericaceae). One bush in Perry County, is estimated to be more than 1,300 years old. New stems spread from the underground rhizomes at a rate of six inches a year, replacing older, dying branches in a continuous process of vegetative reproduction. Box huckleberry blooms in May and early June.

Habitat

Box huckleberry is typically found on north-facing slopes over acidic shale bedrock. Populations are known from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky. It's considered a species of special concern throughout most of this range.

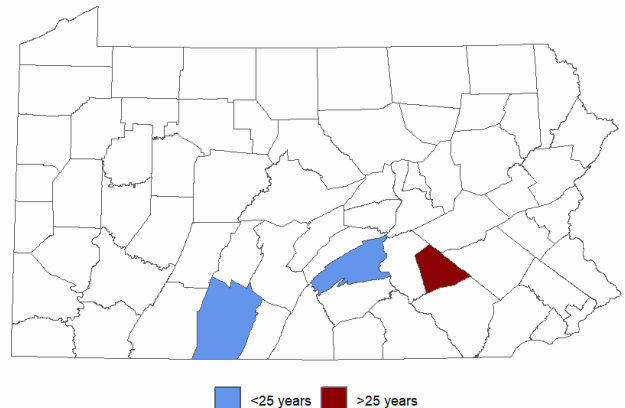
Reasons for Being Threatened

Only three populations of box huckleberry have been found in Pennsylvania. One large population is well protected in a state forest natural area, another has been damaged by road construction. The third has not been seen since 1930. Studies show that germination rate is very low and seedlings are so weak they are unable to grow. Box huckleberry populations are thought to be limited to asexual reproduction by spreading rhizomes.



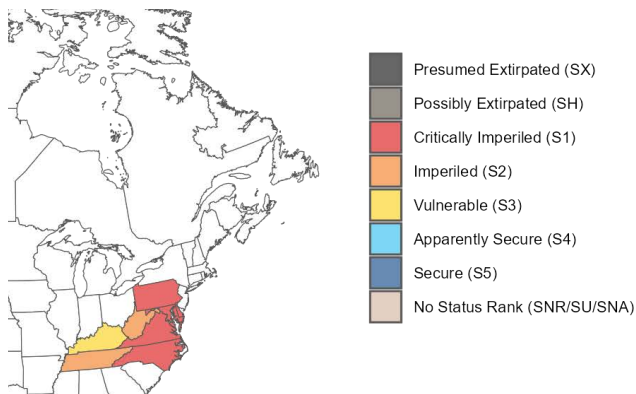
Photo Credit: Carl Keener, Penn State University

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North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe 2025



Management Practices

One box huckleberry population is protected within the Box Huckleberry State Forest Natural Area. In addition, the National Park Service has designated this area as a National Natural Landmark. State Forest rules and regulations prohibit the taking of any plant from state forest land. Wild Plant Management Permits are required prior to collecting Endangered and Threatened plant species for scientific purposes. Further roadwork is unlikely to cause more damage to the second population because the box huckleberry is listed as Threatened and, therefore, protected by regulatory agencies.

References:

- NatureServe. 2025. NatureServe Explorer [web application] NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available at <https://explorer.natureserve.org> (Accessed: May 8, 2025)



Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program

Fact Sheet adapted from: Felbaum, Mitchell, et al. Endangered and Threatened Species of Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, PA: Wild Resource Conservation Fund, 1995.

