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Swamp pink
By Renee Brecht

Each year in late April, the cedar swamps of southern New Jersey come alive with an explosion of color as the swamp pink flower comes into bloom.

Helonias bullata, commonly known as swamp pink, is one of the most unique and beautiful wildflowers of the Eastern United States. It's a member of the lily family, although there are no other lilies quite like it. Its cluster of 30 to 60 bright pink flowers, dotted with blue anthers, sit atop a basal rosette and a stalk that rather resembles asparagus.

Swamp pink likes to have its feet wet, so to speak, and is typically found growing on hummocks and on stream edges of cedar and hardwood swamps, and headwaters of meandering streams.

Historically this plant ranged from Staten Island to the southern Appalachian Mountains. However, many populations have been destroyed due to habitat loss, change of hydrology, and collection. In fact, it was once sold in the middle of a bouquet of trailing arbutus by curbside flower vendors in Philadelphia for a few nickels.

Today it is federally listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, with seventy percent of the global population in southern New Jersey. Citizens United has partnered with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in a program called "Adopt a Swamp Pink" to monitor the health of our local populations. The plant receives special protections, and it is hoped by monitoring the last vestiges of swamp pink that it might brighten our wooded marshes for years to come.