

# Terrestrial & Palustrine Plant Communities Of Pennsylvania

By Jean Fike

## Low heath shrubland

This community type occurs on either sandy soil or on thin soil over bedrock. Soils are acidic, moisture availability is low. This type most commonly occurs on ridgetops or in other situations where exposure to the elements; the frost-pocket phenomenon, or droughty conditions limits the establishment of trees and taller shrubs. These sites are often subject to periodic fire. The dominant species are *Vaccinium angustifolium* (low sweet blueberry), *V. pallidum* (lowbush blueberry), *Kalmia angustifolia* (sheep laurel), *Aronia melanocarpa* (black chokeberry), and/or *Gaylussacia baccata* (huckleberry). Scattered small trees may occur in some places, for example where soil has accumulated in cracks in the bedrock. Typical species include *Pinus rigida* (pitch pine), *P. strobus* (eastern white pine), *Populus tremuloides* (quaking aspen), and *Betula populifolia* (gray birch). The herbaceous and creeping shrub layer includes such species as *Danthonia compressa* (northern oatgrass), *D. spicata* (poverty grass), *Lysimachia quadrifolia* (whorled loosestrife), *Melampyrum lineare* (cow-wheat), *Deschampsia flexuosa* (hairgrass), *Rubus hispidus* (swamp dewberry), *Mitchella repens* (partridge-berry), *Pteridium aquilinum* (bracken), *Schizachyrium scoparium* (little bluestem), *Carex pensylvanica* (Pennsylvania sedge), *C. communis* (a sedge), and *Gaultheria procumbens* (teaberry). Moss and lichen cover on rocks may be considerable; more information is needed on non-vascular species. This community may occur as part of the "Ridgetop acidic barren complex."

**Related types:** The "Scrub oak shrubland" and "Pitch pine - scrub oak woodland" types frequently occur adjacent to this type, usually downslope, on slightly deeper soils, or in less exposed areas.

**Range:** Glaciated NE, Glaciated NW, Pittsburgh Plateau, Pocono Plateau, Ridge and Valley, Unglaciated Allegheny Plateau, and perhaps South Mountain.

**Selected references:** Clark 1946, Hough 1945, Schege and Butch 1980.

**[Crosswalk:** Smith's "Northern Appalachian Low Elevation Acidic Rocky Summit." and "Ridgetop Dwarf-Tree Forest" (in part), TNC's *Vaccinium (myrtilloides, pallidum, angustifolium)* Dwarf-Shrubland Alliance, *Vaccinium (myrtilloides, pallidum, angustifolium)* high Alleghenies (HAL) Community.]