

# Plant Diversity Website

## ***Lonicera caprifolium* L.**

**Common Names:** Italian woodbine, Italian honeysuckle, Perfoliate honeysuckle (1, 6).

**Etymology:** *Lonicera* is named after the 16<sup>th</sup> century German botanist, physicist and herbalist Adam Lonitzer (also spelled Lonicer), while *caprifolium* has its roots in two words. The first is *capri* or *caper*, Latin for “goat,” while the other is the Latin *folium*, which means “leaf.” *Lonicera caprifolium* means “Adam Lonitzer’s goat-leaf.” The term honeysuckle comes from the honey or nectar that can be easily sucked from the flower (3, 4).

**Botanical synonyms:** None found.

**FAMILY:** Caprifoliaceae, the Honeysuckle Family

**Quick Notable Features:**

- fused leaves below the inflorescence
- the corolla is bilabiate with a 4-lobed upper lip
- sessile inflorescences

**Plant Height:** 4.7-6.0m (10)

**Subspecies/varieties recognized:** None found.

**Most Likely Confused with:** *L. sempervirens* is the most likely impostor for this species. It may also be confused with species in the genus *Euonymus*.

**Habitat Preference:** Cultivated, but rarely escapes. It was found “naturalized in dryish open sandy or rocky ground around Marquette in 1916” (4).

**Geographic Distribution in Michigan:** Only found in Marquette County (1).

**Known Elevational Distribution:** Found along trails in the Caucasus as high as 1200m (15).

**Complete Geographic Distribution:** *L. caprifolium* is a native of Europe. In the United States it is only found in Michigan, New York, and New Jersey. Even in those states, it is rather uncommon and some do not even consider it part of the areas’ flora (1, 5).

**Vegetative Plant Description:** This usually estipulate and glabrous or glaucous, perennial woody vine has simple, opposite leaves, which are oval to obovate. If stipules are present, they are greatly reduced. It may also grow as a



woody shrub. When it does, it will have some herbaceous, creeping stems. The leaf margins are entire and the uppermost leaves are united into a disk, while the lower ones are sessile, or nearly so. Although it is not mentioned in American literature, in Sweden it is considered an evergreen (1, 4, 10, 16).

**Climbing Mechanism:** Darwin noted that all members of *Lonicera* climb with the apex of the plant, which moves dextrally (left to right) or, as Darwin refers to it “with the sun” (7).



**Flower Description:** The 4-5cm long flowers are in terminal, sessile clusters, however they can be connate in pairs. The corolla is white or purplish without, and white and glabrous within. The curved corolla is bilabiate, with the upper lip consisting of four lobes and the lower lip single, narrow and reflexed. The five stamens and single, slender style are “very much exserted,” the stigma is capitate and the ovary is inferior (5, 11, 16). The genus *Lonicera* is known to have 2-3 locules, however this has not been confirmed for this species.

**Flowering Time:** In the central and northeastern United States and adjacent parts of Canada, it flowers from May to June (10).

**Pollinator:** Flowers are very fragrant, and become even more fragrant at night when they open. This fact, along with the white, narrow-throated corolla supports nocturnal pollination by Lepidoptera. It has been shown that Hawkmoths can discern the smell of *L. caprifolium* from 100 yards away. Although moths are the most likely pollinators, other small insects and birds may also contribute (8, 12 cited in 13).

**Fruit Type and Description:** A fleshy, red, few- to many- seeded berry that is commonly fed to chickens (4, 17). Size data not found.

**Seed Description:** According to some sources, the plant is sterile and will not produce seeds, and can only be propagated vegetatively (10). However, a Swedish source claims that a white seed will be produced and the embryo inside is “straight” or “complete” (16).

**Dispersal Syndrome:** In general, the small, “attractive red, orange or black” fruits of the genus *Lonicera* are consumed by birds and the seeds of each fruit are dispersed as the bird travels (6). I was unable to find anything more specific to this species.



**Distinguished by:** In Michigan *L. caprifolium* is most likely confused with *L. sempervirens*, another escape from cultivation. The corolla tubes of *L. caprifolium* and *L. sempervirens* are usually between 1.7 and 4.2 cm long, while those of *L. reticulata*, *L. hirsuta*, and *L. dioica* are usually < 1.7cm, sometimes as small as 0.9 cm. In *L.*

*caprifolium* the inflorescences are sessile at the base of the connate leaves and the flowers have bilateral corollas, while inflorescences of *L. sempervirens* are on peduncles and its flowers have nearly regular corollas. The leaves of *L. sempervirens* are also slightly pubescent, while the leaves of *L. caprifolium* are glabrous.

The easiest way to differentiate between *Euonymus* and *Lonicera* is by their leaf margins. Species of *Lonicera* almost always have entire margins, while the margins of members of *Euonymus* are finely serrated (9).

**Other members of the family in Michigan (number of species):** *Lonicera* – 18, *Diervilla* – 1, *Kolkwitzia* – 1, *Linnaea* – 1, *Sambucus* – 2, *Symphoricarpos* – 3, *Triosteum* – 2, *Viburnum* – 11 (1).

**Ethnobotanical Uses:** The fruits can be eaten and the fragrant flowers can be used to make a tea. The herbaceous parts of the plant can be “used as a cutaneous and mucous tonic and vulnerary and the seeds as a diuretic” (8, 17).

**Phylogenetic Information:** The Caprifoliaceae consists of 36 genera. Subclades include Linnaeae (*Dipelta*, *Abelia*, *Kolkwitzia*, *Valeriana* and *Dipascus*), Diervilleae (*Diervilla* and *Weigela*) and an unnamed clade consisting of *Lonicera*, *Symphoricarpos*, and their relatives. Currently, Caprifoliaceae is the only member of the Dipsacales clade, but this organization is somewhat in doubt (2). As it stands, the Dipsacales are part of the Euasterids II, which also contains the Aquifoliales, Apiales, Dipsacales, and Asterales. These are all members of the Core Asterids of the Asterid clade, which, along with the Rosids, make up the Core Tricolpates (2).

**Interesting Quotation or Other Interesting Factoid not inserted above:**

- Gray's Manual of Botany does not agree that it is a true member of the flora of this area because of the lack of evidence of its existence. It has long been reported in the area, but is rarely seen. When the Manual refers to “the area”, it means central and northeastern United States and adjacent Canada (5).
- Its name, *caprifolium*, means “goat-leaf” in Latin, as does the name of another member of the genus, *L. tragophylla*. However *tragophylla* is derived from the Greek “tragus” and “phyllo” (3).
- This plant is called “goat-leaf” in Latin, French, German, and Italian and this is probably because the herbaceous parts are a favorite food of goats (17).
- According to many gardening websites, it has a reputation among gardeners for attracting aphids.
- According to some holistic medicine websites, it is used as a treatment for those “Longing for the past; living in past often with regrets; not living in the present. Upset at missed opportunities” (14).

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