

Lewton's milkwort

(*Polygala lewtonii*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Lewton's milkwort is a state-endangered wildflower endemic to only six counties in Central Florida. It occurs in scrub, sandhill and pine barren habitats where maintenance includes a regular fire regime. It blooms in late winter and spring, attracting a variety of pollinators, especially leafcutter bees, hover flies and bee flies.

Lewton's milkwort produces open-pollinated flowers as well as two types of self-pollinating flowers — one occurs above-ground and the other underground. The open-pollinated (chasmogamous) flowers are the most noticeable. They are small, dark pink and born on loose, many-flowered terminal spikes. These flowers have three pink winglike sepals and three fringed petals. The petals are fused and form a keel. The above-ground self-pollinating (cleistogamous) flowers are tiny, green and occur in the leaf axils. The underground flowers have no pigment and are born on few-flowered racemes. Leaves are small (up to ½-inch long), linear to spatulate in shape, and succulent. They are alternately arranged. Fruits are oblong capsules, each containing two seeds. Each seed has a hairlike appendage that attracts ants, which help disperse the seeds. The plant has a long taproot that helps protect it during fire occurrence.

The name *Polygala* comes from the Greek *polys*, which means “many or much,” and *gala*, which means “milk.” It is so-named because it was once believed that the presence of *Polygala* species in cow fields would result in higher milk production (hence the common name of “milkwort” for both the genus and family.)

Family: Polygalaceae (Milkwort family)

Native range: Marion, Lake, Polk, Osceola, Brevard and Highlands counties

To see where natural populations of Lewton's milkwort have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 9–10

Soil: Dry, sandy soils

Exposure: Full sun

Growth habit: up to 12" tall

Lewton's milkwort is not commercially available. Find it in its natural habitat.



Photo by Laurie Sullivan, USFWS (public domain)