

## BWSR Featured Plant

**Name: Spreading Jacob's Ladder (*Polemonium reptans*)**

**Plant Family: Phlox (Polemoniaceae)**

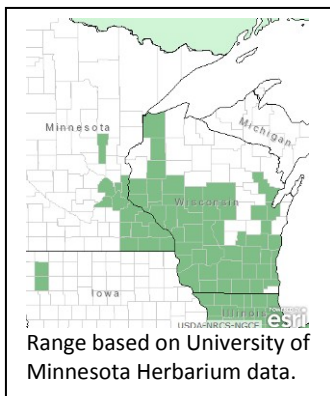


Spreading Jacob's ladder typically is found in moist shady spots.

### Identification



Leaves have opposite leaflets.



Spreading Jacob's ladder emerges from the forest floor in early spring and blooms in late April and May. This herbaceous perennial plant grows 10 to 20 inches tall depending on conditions, and thrives in moist, shady habitats of southeastern Minnesota. The common name refers to the pairs of opposite leaflets said to resemble a series of steps on a ladder seen in a dream by the biblical Jacob. The specific epithet *reptans* is Latin for "creeping" or "crawling." Like other spring wildflowers, it provides important early season sources of pollen and nectar for pollinators.

Clusters of light blue flowers grow on fine stalks and have five, oval-shaped, slightly pointed petals. The hollow stems range from light to reddish green. Leaflets on the compound, alternate leaves can be either opposite or alternate. Lower leaves tend to have elongated stalks with up to 17 leaflets. The leaflets are lance-elliptic in shape and can be up to 1.5 inches long by 0.5 inch wide. Minnesota is also home to Western Jacob's ladder (*P. occidentalis* ssp. *lacustre*) an endangered subspecies of *Polemonium* in northeast Minnesota that is similar in appearance to Spreading Jacob's ladder but has larger floral stalks and petals with prominent pointed tips.

### Range

The species is found in high-quality deciduous woodlands and along streams with partial shade and moist soils. In Minnesota, it's mainly found in the southeast; it's more widespread in Wisconsin. The species is found over much of the eastern U.S., with the exception of Florida and South Carolina. It's listed as threatened in Michigan, and is endangered in New Jersey.

Statewide Wetland  
Indicator Status:

- FAC



Flowers bloom in spring on weak stems.

Primary Uses:

- Pollinator nutrition
- Garden plantings
- Ethnobotanical

## Uses

Valued for its attractive blue flowers, Spreading Jacob's ladder is cultivated as a garden perennial for cool, shady locations. The nectar and pollen that it produces attract many pollinators including native flies, beetles, moths, butterflies and bees. Like Virginia waterleaf, Virginia bluebells, columbine and wild geranium, Jacob's ladder is an important resource to bumblebee queens in search of pollen and nectar to supply their nests and raise a colony. Historically, the plant was used as an herbal medication for coughs and inflammation.

## Planting Recommendations

Planting sites should have well-drained soils in light to moderate shade. Plants are not aggressive but will spread outward over time.

Jacob's ladder is a good low-maintenance choice, as it will persist and compete well with other plants. Start with seed, plant division or containerized plants. Lightly rake seed into the soil in spring after ripening, and cover lightly with leaves to retain moisture. Alternatively, late-fall seeding allows natural stratification over winter. Divide clumps in early spring as new growth emerges, making sure to keep roots moist. Containerized specimens provide more flexibility with planting time, as long as the plants have enough shade and water.

### Planting Methods

- Seed
- Divisions
- Containers



Jacob's ladder grows with other woodland forbs in partial shade.

## Similar Species

Western Jacob's ladder has taller flower stalks and more pointed petals than spreading Jacob's ladder. Bellflower (*Campanula rotundifolia*) has similar flowers but lacks the compound leaves (it has grass-like leaves).



Tall flower stalks support Western Jacob's ladder.

**Photo Credit:** Peter Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers



The petals of Western Jacob's ladder have pointed tips. **Photo Credit:** Peter Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers



Bellflower has a similar flower to Jacob's ladder, but lacks the compound leaves.

## References

Minnesota Wildflowers (*Polemonium reptans*): <http://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/spreading-jacobs-ladder>

Woodland Plants Jacob's ladder: [http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/woodland/plants/jacob\\_ladder.htm](http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/woodland/plants/jacob_ladder.htm)

USDA Plants Database: <https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=PORE2>

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