



## **Buffalonut — *Pyralaria pubera* Tree Root Parasite**

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*Pyralaria pubera* is a parasitic shrub found in understories of old disturbed forest sites in the Appalachians and foothills. *Pyralaria pubera* is a root parasite. It makes a living using other trees, shrubs and herbs roots to gather water and essential elements. The fruit is unique and the most noticed part of the plant, often being brought in from the woods for identification. This publication is about the buffalonut parasite, cobra of Appalachian forests of the Southeastern United States.

### Common Names

*Pyralaria pubera* has several common names including buffalo-nut (buffalo nut, buffalonut), oil nut, elk nut, mother-in-law nut, rabbitwood, mountain coconut, crazy nut, and Cherokee salve. The names buffalonut and elk nut come from early colonists who witnessed woodland bison and woodland / Eastern elk eating fruit in winter. The oil nut name is derived from the acrid oil in the fruit. The mother-in-law name was derived from veiled poisoning threats. The Cherokee salve name is derived from the plant's herbal medicine uses by Native Americans.

### Scientific Names

The genus name of *Pyralaria* is derived from the Latin word for “small pear.” The species name *pubera* means “downy or hairy.” The scientific name *Pyralaria pubera* translates into a “downy small pear,” after the small pear shaped fruit and trichomes (hair-like features) on twigs and leaves. *Pyralaria pubera* is equivalent to the older name *Pyralaria oleifera*, which means an oily small pear. The genus name *Pyralaria* is the modern accepted name and replaced a series of old genus names like *Hamiltonia*, *Calinux*, and *Sphaerocarya*.

There are two or three species of *Pyralaria* around the world. Depending upon taxonomic divisions, there are either one or two *Pyralaria* species in the Himalayan mountains and Tibetan plateau of South-central Asia, which are small trees (i.e. *Pyralaria edulus*). The other species is *Pyralaria pubera*, a medium-sized shrub of Central and Southern Appalachian mountains of Eastern North American.

### Family Ties

*Pyralaria pubera* is in the sandalwood family (Santalaceae family / Santalales order) of flowering dicot plants. Almost all of this family is composed of parasitic herbs, shrubs and trees. The family name comes from the tropical genus name *Santalum* which provides sandalwood oil and incense scents. The sandalwood family currently has about 38 genera and more than 600 species. Family members are

spread around the world primarily in the tropics and sub-tropics. A few members are in temperate and high altitude zones. Four genera of this family are in the Southeastern United States.

#### Habit & Site

*Pyrularia pubera* is a straggly, medium to tall shrub standing 4-14 feet tall (average 6.5 feet tall) with its arching stem growing up to 3 inches in diameter. The shrub is considered a hemi-parasite generating most of its own food, but parasitizing surrounding trees, shrubs and herbs to gather water and essential elements. It is one of 29 root parasitic plants identified in the southeastern United States.

*Pyrularia pubera* is sparsely branched, with twigs concentrated near branch ends. It has a limited, low density, sparsely branched root system. All parts of the shrub contain an acrid oil which can be found most highly concentrated in fruit. This shrub grows primarily in open cove and ridge sites with forests of mixed deciduous hardwood trees or mixed conifers and hardwoods. *Pyrularia pubera* occurrence in forests appears to be restricted by seed germination and site constraints, and is not limited by slope, aspect, or surrounding vegetation type. As a root parasite, it is not host specific, parasitizing many species. The places where it is most abundant is in open secondary growth forests where there has been disturbance in the past, like fire, logging, road-cuts, storm blow-downs, and extensive litter disruption. It is not an early successional species, but a wide gap-phase species.

*Pyrularia pubera* can be found growing across many upland sites ranging from moist coves to dry ridge tops throughout the Central and Southern Appalachians and adjacent areas of the Piedmont. This shrub grows between 650 feet in elevation up to 4,400 feet. It was first recorded botanically around 1800 and first cultivated as a curiosity in 1897. It grows in cold hardiness zones 5b to 7b (predominately in zone 6b), and in heat zones 4 to 7. Some consider it to have been a highly successful chestnut parasite before chestnut forests were destroyed by chestnut blight. It does not grow on wetland soils, clay soils, or soils high in calcium. It is inconspicuous to most people, except for the fruit.

#### Location, Location

*Pyrularia pubera* has been identified growing as a native in ten states including: Long Island, New York; Southwestern Pennsylvania (3 counties); East-Southeastern half of West Virginia (20 counties); Western third of Virginia (24 counties); East-Southeastern Kentucky (16 counties); Eastern Tennessee (26 counties); Western North Carolina (35 counties); Northwest South Carolina (4 counties); North Georgia (26 counties); and, Northeastern Alabama (4 counties). *Pyrularia pubera* is suspected to exist but has not been positively identified in the extreme Western tip of Maryland. Figure 1.

Eleven states have listed the historic presence of *Pyrularia pubera* on their territories. *Pyrularia pubera* is listed as a rare species in Pennsylvania. The farthest South in the United States this shrub grows as a native is in the Pine Mountain area of West-central Georgia, a Southern-most, disjunct outlier of the Southern end of the Appalachians North of Columbus, GA. The farthest North the shrub grows as a potential native is on Long Island, New York, although in the past it was listed as an exotic species.

#### Leaves

The simple, deciduous leaves of *Pyrularia pubera* arise alternately along twigs with short (0.2 - 0.5 inch) leaf stems growing clustered on short shoots. Leaves are soft, thin, and veiny with tiny transparent dots visible when held up to the light. Leaves vary in shape from broadly lanceolate to broadly elliptical or ovate. Leaves are pointed at both ends, with the base tending toward a more

rounded or wedge shape. In some deeply shaded leaves, both ends can be more rounded. Pyralaria pubera leaf edges are smooth, entire and sometimes appear wavy.

Leaves are usually 2-9 inches long by 1-3 inches wide, but can be up to 11 inches long and 5.5 inches wide. The aspect ratio of leaves average 1.9 times longer than wide. Fresh leaves tend to snap when folded in half. Leaf blade surfaces are slightly wrinkled and dull on the upper surface, downy on the bottom, and dark green to apple-green in color. Downy hairs (trichomes) are present, and small, short, and single-pointed.

Leaves vary greatly in appearance and size on the same individual shrub. Flowering branches tend to have a few small leaves up to 5 inches long by 2 inches wide. Non-flowering branches hold many more and larger leaves up to 9 inches long by 4 inches wide. Leaves tend to become smaller in size the farther down branch they are held. Larger leaves tend to be clustered on short spur-like twigs. Leaves closer to the branch ends are more oblong with pointed ends, while leaves closer to the branch bases are more elliptical with rounded ends.

Leaves come out early in Spring and are held long into Fall, compared with other trees and shrubs in the surrounding forest. Leaves stay on the shrub without Fall color change until killed by freezing temperatures. Pyralaria pubera has no abscission layer at leaf bases. Once leaves are dead and are knocked off, they remain visible and undamaged on the forest floor for an extended time. Leaves contain a relatively large concentration of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus, all gleaned from hosts. Their slow decomposition on the forest floor is due to their oil concentration. They serve as a slow release fertilizer over many months, recycling essential elements. Leaves, and all other parts, of Pyralaria pubera contain large concentrations of calcium oxalate crystals, thought to minimize animal consumption. Figure 2.

### Good Buds

Pyralaria pubera buds are pointed, greenish in color with reddish tips. Buds are oval in shape, relatively large, and most noticeable on older twigs, with no true terminal bud present. Each bud has several short scales at its base with many longer, over-lapping, bright green colored scales above. Buds are without any type of stalk and occasionally appear clumped in older leaf axils. Buds swell early in the growing season, usually before most of the overstory trees. Leaves expand from these buds as the new twig pushes out after the last heavy frost. Figure 3.

### Few Twigs

Pyralaria pubera twigs are stout and arching in shape and form. Older twigs are olive-brown in color. Young twigs are green and covered with minute hairs (trichomes), grading into a smooth surface on older twigs. Twigs bear no stipule scars. Leaf scars are round to shield-shaped, slightly raised, and usually contain a single (can occasionally be up to three), round, sunken vascular bundle scars. The twig pith is white in color and spongy. Few twigs are kept on a stem, with most self-pruned early which causes the shrub to look gangly and leggy. There are many twig abscission scars from self-pruning. Twig abscission scars are elliptical.

### Stem & Bark

Pyralaria pubera stems are green in color when young, fading to olive-brown to grey-brown after the first year. Twigs, stems, and roots have a noticeable thick green secondary cortex layer. The corky periderm starts to develop after the first year. Younger stems are more greenish-grey with older stems

more brownish-grey with white elliptical lenticels. Old stem periderm becomes bumpy and warty with age. Stem wood has a diffuse porous vascular architecture.

#### Flowers

*Pyrularia pubera* is functionally a dioecious shrub, with each plant bearing either male or female flowers. Some consider *Pyrularia pubera* to be “sub-dioecious” but no research was found to support this observation. The sparse flowers are generated at branch tips or in terminal axils of end-most leaves. Flowers are inconspicuous, elongated, small, yellow-green colored, unisex spikes. Flowering occurs in the last half of April to the first half of May. Flowering is completed before a complete canopy of leaves are fully expanded.

Female flowers are few in number on branch tips in twin or single short spikes. Female flowers have non-functional male parts present, usually seen as four vestigial stamens. Female flower spikes are 0.4 — 1.2 inches long with 7-10 flowers. Flowers have a five-lobed, recurving disk with no petals. Male flowers are generated on 0.8-2.5 inch long spikes with 15-32 flowers. Each flower is about 0.16 inch across. Male flowers usually have eight short stalked stamens in two whorls, with the inner four stamens much smaller. Male flowers have four to six recurved green sepals with hairy tufts at their base.

#### Fruit

The fruit of *Pyrularia pubera* is considered a drupe (dry drupe), appearing like a thin-husked, large seeded hickory. Ripe fruit splits to release a seed. Fruiting is occasional, not abundant, with fruit on the plant from July to September, and shed in October. Fruit has a thin pulpy, oily flesh and is light shiny green in color turning a dull yellowish-green when ripe. Fruit is round to pear-shaped, tending to be widest near its end, and is approximately one inch in diameter. The fruit stem is about 0.4 inches long. Fruit has a crown-like halo around its end which is the mature remains of five persistent lobes from its flower disk. The fruit base has small white-colored raised dots. Figure 4.

Few fruits are generated and grow to maturity, usually numbering only 2-4 per branch and 6-30 per female individual. Figure 5. There are approximately 75 fruit per pound. Fruit contains an acrid oil, similar to olive oil in consistency. The fruit coat prevents oxygen and water from getting to the seed. The fruit coat, and internal seed dormancy, can delay germination for several years in soil and litter of a woodland area. Figure 6.

Fruit splits along its length to expose a single round seed 0.5 - 0.9 inches in diameter. There are approximately 235 seeds per pound. Seeds are minutely pointed at one end with a small indentation on the other end. Inside the seed is an oily food supply tissue supporting a dormant, small, short embryo, visible upon ripening. The seed coat is smooth, hard, and light tan in color. Seed germination usually occurs in the first and second Spring after fruit fall, if a seed has had ample chilling in the forest litter. Limited third year germination is possible.

Fruit and seed are considered poisonous in quantity when ingested by humans. The fruit has a unpleasant odor and a bland oily taste. Water and alcohol based extracts of fruit and seed can be lethal. Tasting the fruit can cause severe mouth irritation from interactions with the acrid oil, the large quantities of calcium oxalate crystals present, and the presence of several toxins (one similar in physiological action to cobra venom). A number of animals can safely eat the fruit. Deer heavily browse vegetative tissue and fruit. The shrub readily sprouts back after grazing. Fruit and seed transport is by water, gravity, and animal consumption and deposition.

## Culture

*Pyrularia pubera* can be grown by collecting the sparse fruits when ripe in Fall (around the first of October.) Immediately remove the fruit coat and place seed in soil filled pots or in soil beds. Pots or beds should have young host trees already established. Place the *Pyrularia pubera* seed at the small host (nurse) tree's base. Seeds have a significant dormancy process. Expect approximately 40% of all seeds to germinate if the fruit coat is removed and seed coat is scarified. The fruit coat must be removed to allow oxygen, moisture, and soil micro-flora to contact the seed coat in order to initiate germination. A cold stratification period of three months has proven effective in dissipating dormancy factors. Once a seedling is well established, the host can be removed. A good program of nitrogen fertilization and watering then must be maintained for survival and growth. Plant the seedlings next to mature host trees where good light resources are available.

## Reproduction

Shrub reproduction is by vegetative growth and by seed. *Pyrularia pubera* spreads and holds forested understory sites primarily through vegetative reproduction. One central stem will generate several thick rhizomes which radiate away from the primary stem, eventually turning upward and forming a leafy shoot at some distance (up to 20 feet) from the parent stem. Rhizomes (which are horizontal stems growing below ground) have small scaly leaves at each node. Rhizomes have all the parts of a stem including nodes, lateral buds, a pith, and a thick cortex. Rhizomes do not have root architectural features like an endodermis. Rhizomes will swell at their ends in the soil providing a food storage organ. Rhizomes actively grow in Spring and Fall.

Root-generated sprouts also initiate new stems up to 3 to 10 feet away from a parent stem. Reproducing primarily by vegetative means allows for large patches of genetically identical stems to be found in forest understories. Seed germination and seedling growth has many problems compared with vegetative sprouting. Seedlings must establish host contacts within 2-3 month, or find a good source of essential elements (especially nitrogen and phosphorus), or the seedling will die.

## Root System

The primary root coming from a germinating seed grows downward into well-aerated soil until a minimum oxygen level or some physical constraint is reached. Lateral roots are then generated along the primary root, each growing many yards away from the stem base with little branching. Lateral roots sense proximity of host roots exudates and come up from below to make contact, which can be up to 40 feet away from the main stem. The interface established between parasite and host is called a "haustorium."

*Pyrularia pubera* roots are sparse and not as fibrous as other shrub and tree species on the same site. An advantage of a parasitic lifestyle is the small investment in root tissues. Unfortunately, a limited root system and poor water use efficiency can lead to severe wilting on hot afternoons. *Pyrularia pubera* can grow well without a host if fertilized. It is clear from artificial and natural regeneration that composted organic matter and a healthy aerobic soil micro-flora and fauna are needed to facilitate effective infection.

## Hosts

The parasite / host interface area of *Pyrularia pubera* is called a "haustoria" (plural) or a "haustorium" (singular). *Pyrularia pubera* haustoria connect with a large variety of woody and

herbaceous plants growing in the same soil. More than 60 species, 50 genera, and 31 families are parasitized. *Pyrularia pubera* will even parasitize other *Pyrularia pubera*, but not its own genetically identical roots. Other trees not normally growing in the native range of *Pyrularia pubera* also have been successfully parasitized in culture. Notably, red and American elm (*Ulmus* spp.) are not parasitized. Haustoria connections take nitrogen, phosphorous, and water from the host. The dryer a site or season, the more haustoria generated.

Native trees parasitized include, but are not limited to: ash, aspen, basswood, beech, birch, blue-beech, buffalonut, cherry, chestnut, dogwood, hazel, hemlock, hickory, ironwood, magnolia, maple, mountain-laurel, oak, persimmon, pine, redbud, rhododendron, sassafras, sparkleberry, sourwood, sumac, tupelo, wahoo, vaccinium, viburnum, witch-hazel, and yellow-poplar. Trees parasitized in the laboratory included: alder, ginkgo, Kentucky coffeetree, sugarberry, and sweetgum. Trees not parasitized (field observations and/or laboratory testing) include: black locust, catalpa, Douglas fir, elm, true cedar, and yellowwood .

### Haustoria

Haustoria form quickly on roots of host plants 1- 5 months into the growing season. Only small (up to one inch diameter) woody host roots are parasitized. It is difficult to dig and find haustoria as *Pyrularia pubera* roots are brittle and easily broken. The exterior of a haustorium is white to light tan in color, aging to brown. Haustoria appear as flattened, rounded clumps of tissue stuck to the side of a host root. Haustoria do not possess a vascular cambium, generate secondary growth, or have wood. Haustoria usually exist for less than one year, and parasite roots form new haustoria and reconnect with the same or new host roots every year.

Haustoria attachment can be generically described as a “kiss.” The exterior tissue of the haustoria varies in size by the host root size and species (i.e. very small on herbaceous plant roots.) Exterior tissues form an elliptical to round-shaped adhesive seal over a host plant’s root, like lips sealing over a host’s root surface. The exterior tissues help protect the inner vascular tissues of the parasite. Inner tissues push against and dissolve intercellular materials of the host root secondary cortex and phloem. Haustorium grows cells to the depth of the vascular cambium and xylem-mother-cells being produced in the host root. Figure 7.

Many xylem connections are established between host and parasite, with parasite tissue aligned beside host tissue, but not entering cell walls of the host. The haustorium pushes lightly against the host root tissues and uses enzymes and growth regulators to break apart cell connections and control defensive actions of the host. Host tissues grow around and interface with haustorium cells. The host will compartmentalize off roots sustaining too much damage or losing too much growth resources to the parasite. By the end of the season, haustoria leave a sunken, elliptical scar surrounded by wound-wood on woody host roots. Residual damage to host roots can be significant and lead to root girdling. The haustoria and parasite’s roots are brittle and easily break if pulled upon, many times leaving no hint of root parasitism

### Pests

The greatest damaging agent to this parasitic shrub comes from animal grazing, particularly deer. Rabbits and other rodents consume the periderm. The only pathogenic pest cited as significant to *Pyrularia pubera* is a vascular blight fungi (*Trichosphaeria* spp.), which causes whole *Pyrularia pubera* stands to be damaged and die.

### Local Relative

A sandalwood family member confused with *Pyrularia pubera* is in the genus *Nestronia* in the Southeastern United States. *Nestronia* is a much shorter shrub with opposite leaves, but it is also a parasite.

### Snake Oil Poison

A unique component of *Pyrularia pubera* is the presence of five different animal-like toxins in its tissues, especially concentrated in the fruit. The shrub contains purothionin, viscotoxin, phoratoxin, crambim, and thionin. A number of these toxins are shared with other sandalwood family members like the mistletoes. Thionin is a small protein which has been proven to be hemolytic (blood), cytotoxic (cells), and neurotoxic (nerves). Thionin attacks membranes in humans (causing them to be leaky) and red blood cells (destroying them.) Thionin can attack heart muscles. It shares the same form of damage and the same binding site within animal cells as does cobra venom, even though it is not similar chemically.

Different animals have different tolerances for the fruit of *Pyrularia pubera* and for thionin. Rabbits, pigs and humans all show serious reactions to thionin while horses, cattle, mice, deer, and sheep tolerate the toxin well. After ingestion there is a 1 to 2 hour delay of symptom on-set in people. A severe symptom in humans is convulsions.

### Conclusions

The natural history of the Southern Appalachians is represented by many plants and animals. The most successful of these forest systems contain plants which are “free-loaders,” reproducing generation after generation on the root investments of others. *Pyrularia pubera* is one of these plants, an interesting parasite because of its life and its animal health interactions. There is a green cobra in the Appalachians and it is the buffalonut.

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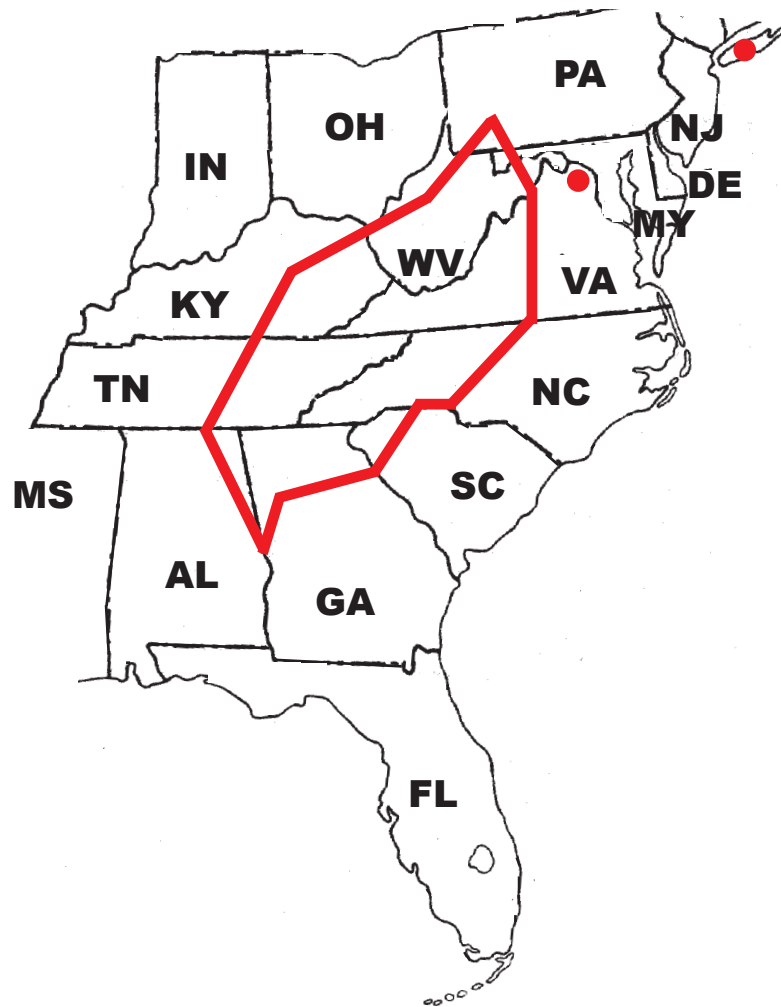


Figure 1: Generalized native range of *Pyrularia pubera* extracted from multiple sources.



Figure 2: *Pyrularia pubera* leaves.  
(photographs taken in North Georgia and provided by Daniel Williams)



Figure 3: *Pyrularia pubera* leaf bases and buds.  
(photographs taken in North Georgia and provided by Daniel Williams)



Figure 4: *Pyralaria pubera* fruit.  
(photographs taken in North Georgia and provided by Daniel Williams)



Figure 5: *Pyralaria pubera* leaves and fruit.  
(photographs taken in North Georgia and provided by Daniel Williams)

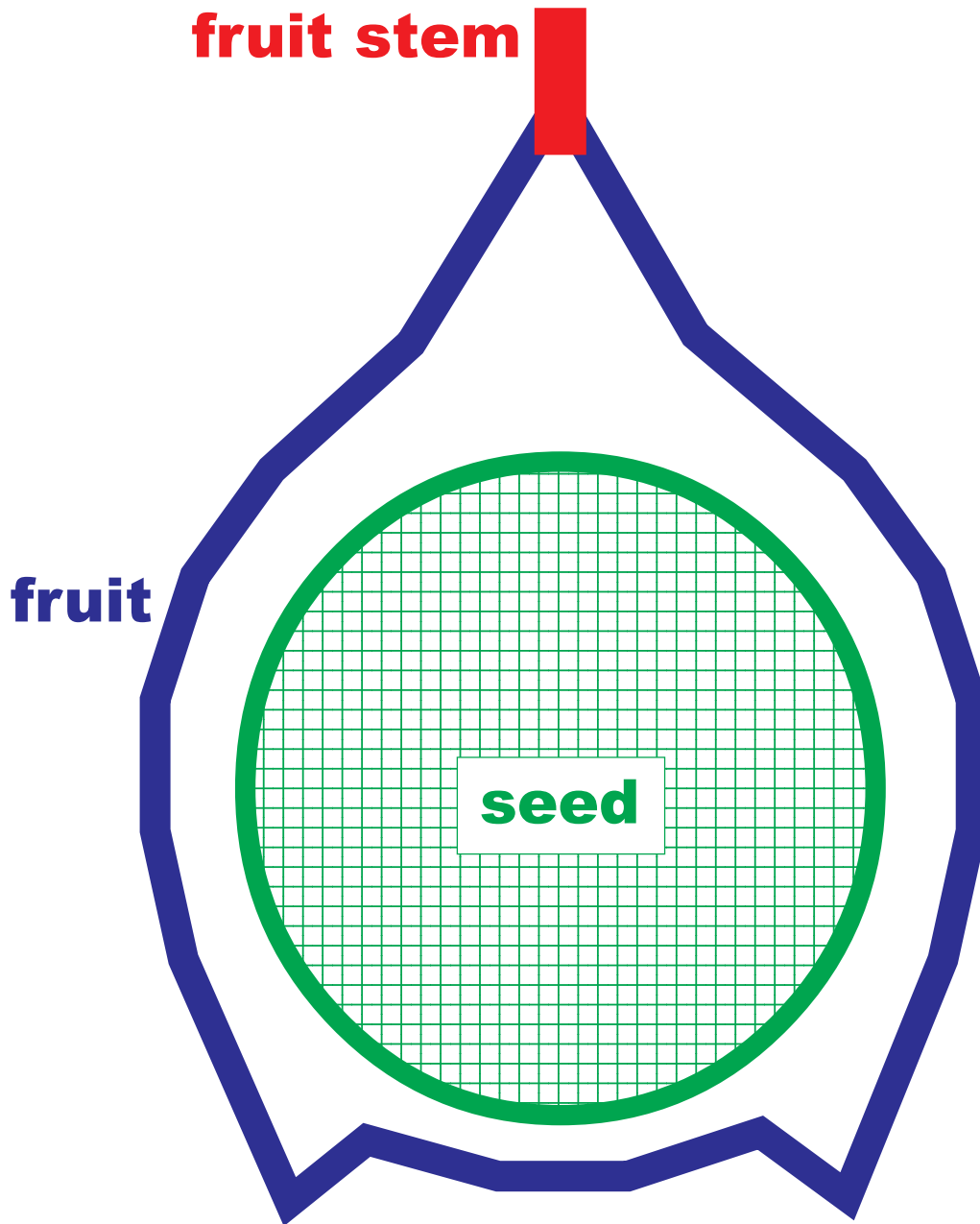


Figure 6: Simplified cross-sectional view of *Pyralaria pubera* fruit and seed.

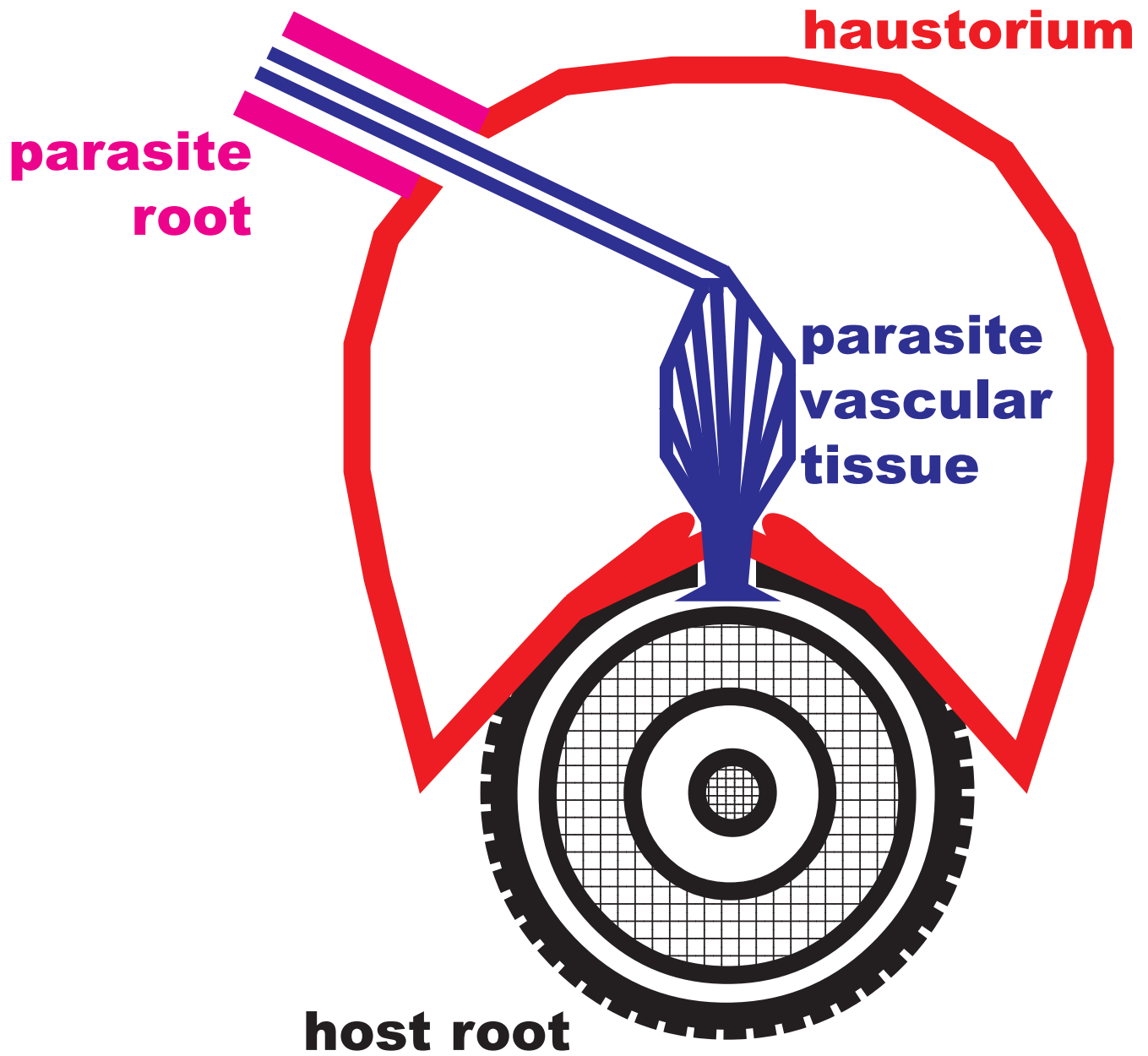


Figure 7: Cross-sectional view of *Pyrularia pubera* haustorium on a host root.