

NATIVE PERENNIALS



Turnip, Prairie

Psoralea esculenta

Native. Short forb with hairy leaves produces upright flower stem with lavender to blue flowers. Often grows on rocky and gravelly hillsides. Needs good drainage. Plant goes dormant during summer. Tuberous roots sometimes used for food.

Photo Credit: Big Sioux Nursery, Inc., Watertown, SD

Description: Breadroot scurfpea (prairie turnip) is a low-growing forb with one or more hairy, upright flowering stems, generally 5 to 9 inches tall. Main stems arise from an underground egg to spindle-shaped, tuberous root up to 2 inches in diameter and enclosed in a thick brown, leathery skin. Foliage is densely hairy, including the 5-parted palmate leaves. In May and June, the short and dense flower spikes have blue flowers that fade with age. Soon after the plant matures, which is frequently in July, an abscission layer forms, causing the stem to break off near the ground.

Distribution/Habitat: Breadroot scurfpea is native from the Canadian prairies to Wisconsin, Arkansas, Oklahoma, northeast Colorado, and Montana. Although frequent in the northern Great Plains, plants are never in dense stands. It is most common on prairie hillsides, seldom occurring on lowlands. This scurfpea is found throughout the native prairie areas of South Dakota.

Comments: Breadroot scurfpea, Indian breadroot, prairie turnip, or tipsin has poor palatability for cattle but is grazed by sheep and wildlife. It decreases with grazing pressure and over harvest of roots by humans. Plains Indians used the starchy, tuberous root as a staple in their diet, hence the common names. Roots are dug during or after flowering but before the stems break off. They are eaten fresh or dried for later use.

Credit: James E. Johnson & Gary E. Larson, Grassland Plants of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains. SDSU, Brookings, SD. B-566 (rev.) August 1999. Page 190.

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