Of interest this week at Beal...

Common jewelweed

*Impatiens capensis*

Family: the Balsam family, Balsaminaceae
Also called snapweed, and touch-me-not

The genus name *Impatiens* means ‘impatient’ in Latin. This genus is familiar to flower gardeners the world over seeking to grow colorful blooms in shady environments. The species most commonly marketed in the horticultural trades is *Impatiens walleriana*, a species native to Tanzania and Mozambique in East Africa. Eastern North America has two endemic species that are common inhabitants of shady moist locations as well; *Impatiens capensis*, the subject of this page, and *Impatiens pallida*, the yellow jewelweed. Jewelweeds are in the balsam family, the Balsaminaceae, that is distributed worldwide. At least one species, *Impatiens glandulifera* has proven to be an aggressive alien invading species. Even this species, *I. capensis*, is an aggressive invasive in the Pacific Northwest and Britain.

Jewelweed is an annual wildflower of swamp edges and wet forested places, reaching 1 to 3 feet in height. It has opposite leaves with rounded teeth and a powdery texture that repels water. This property of its leaves make perched raindrops appear silvery, hence the name jewelweed. Its flowers have a conical corolla that is orange with red-orange spots, although the reddish spots may coalesce into large red areas in some populations. Our other native *Impatiens pallida* has yellow flowers with a few red dots. *Impatiens* stems are swollen at the nodes and appear translucent and fluid-filled. In many locations large plants will have prop roots emerging from the basal region of the stem. They frequently form pure stands that are maintained by showering the area in autumn with seeds expelled from the elastically dehiscent seed capsules (see top of next page).

Jewelweed has two strategies for seed production; cleistogamous flowers, blooms that are programmed to never open and therefore guarantee self pollination, and chasmogamous flowers that open to the world of cross pollination. In a 2002 article, Yingqing Lu hypothesizes that this strategy is able to both maintain diversity and reduce the possible effects of inbreeding depression. This dual chleistogamous/chasmogamous flowering habit is shared by both of our native species of *Impatiens*. 
In the Indigenous First Nations world, jewelweed had a myriad of medicinal uses, some of which persist today. The most commonly held medicinal uses, then and now are centered on various skin complaints. According to Moerman (1998) this included uses in Cherokee communities to treat rashes on babies, hives, liver spots, and as a treatment for poison ivy. It is this last use, poison ivy treatment, that has the greatest reputation in today’s world. This is a situation where there is large support from the general population advocating its efficacy and value, but where, from the research community, the support is very thin.

Impatiens capensis is also called touch-me-not and snapweed because its ripe seed pods explode upon contact. They are held together by ‘bio-elastic’ bands that release when touched to spray seeds some 4 - 8 feet (inset photo below).