

## Plant of the Month

*Aphyllon fasciculatum* – clustered broomrape; synonym-  
*Orobanche fasciculata*

**Family:** Orobanchaceae, broomrape family

**Habit:** Perennial; 7 – 25 cm tall; flowers on individual stalks, in clusters of 3-18; calyx (outer petal-like whorl) broadly triangular or tips coming to a sharp point; corolla (inner whorl of petals) 12-28 mm long, rounded edges, color ranges from yellow to pink to dark maroon with purple lines and yellow patches between lobes of the lower lip; fine hairs or glands cover surface of calyx, corolla and stalk; fruit are capsules 10-13 mm long. Flowers May – August.

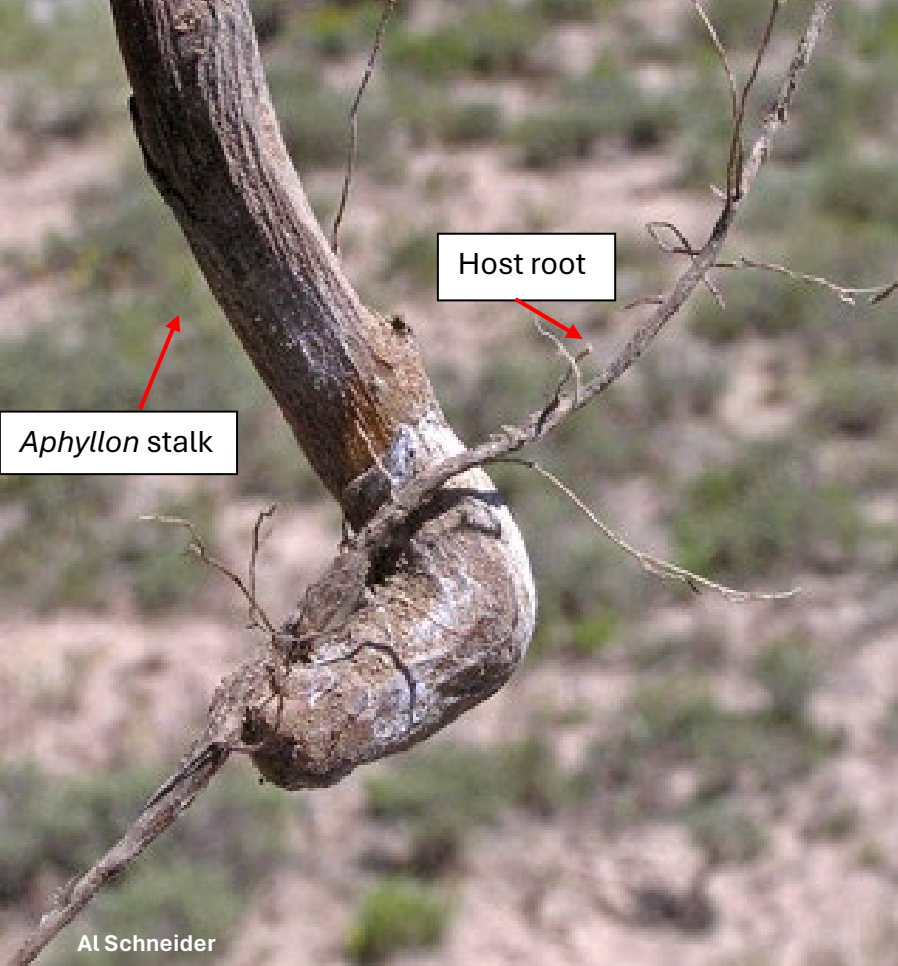


**Habitat:** Occurs at 3,400 – 9,500 feet in sandy soil, usually parasitizing sagebrush.

Some members of the *Orobanchaceae* family lack chlorophyll, the green pigment that enables plants to convert light into energy through photosynthesis. Plants that cannot photosynthesize resort to parasitism to obtain essential nutrients for growth and reproduction. Members of the broomrape family, including our plant of the month, clustered broomrape, can steal nutrients from a host plant through specialized root structures called haustoria. The haustorium protrudes from the parasite's root and penetrates the host plant's vascular root tissue. Think of it like the botanical version of Dracula. While broomrape does not appear to benefit its host plant (symbiotic relationship), it also doesn't appear to cause significant harm. In fact, it wouldn't do the parasite any good to kill its host plant. However, there are non-native species, such as branched broomrape (*Phelipanche ramosa*), that are listed as noxious because they affect crop yields.

Members of the *Orobanchaceae* can be quite difficult to identify solely by appearance, sometimes requiring genetic testing. However, because broomrapes tend to favor a particular plant, the host species is typically used for identification. Clustered broomrape is most often associated with sage (*Artemisia*). Clustered broomrape may be confused with the less common yellow clustered broomrape (*Aphyllon franciscanum*), which has pointed petals and parasitizes buckwheat (*Eriogonum*).

What's with the name, you ask? *Broom* is from Old English and refers to the shrubby plants that members of *Orobanchaceae* were observed to parasitize. *Rapum* is a Latin word meaning "tuber" or "turnip," referring to the thick underground stalk. I know, I still don't like the name either.



## Sources

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