

# Technical Report



## Wetland Flora

No. 00-7 / July 2000

Gene Silberhorn

### Red Bay

*Persea barbonia* (L.) Sprengel.

#### Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Red bay is a southern tree that grows to about 25 feet tall in Virginia, but may attain heights of over 60 feet or more farther south along the seaboard. It has shiny, long oblong alternate, evergreen leaves, reddish brown bark and branches (pubescent) and a faintly spicy fragrance. The aromatic leaves, "bay leaves" are used to flavor various foods. The young, tender leaves of spring are best suited for flavoring. Flowers are yellow-green, small and short-lived (dropping after one or two weeks). The flowers are relatively inconspicuous in the spring, but in autumn dark blue or black plum-like fruits (drupes) appear. Late in the season, the dark leathery leaves are often disfigured with warty insect galls. The infestation is so common, in fact, that it may be considered to be a diagnostic characteristic of the tree late in the growing season. The foliage of this tree may be confused with another leathery leaved tree in coastal wetlands, sweet bay (*Magnolia virginica*) Wetland Flora No. 91-11 / November 1991, but the latter has showy white flowers and bright red fruits. Without fruits or flowers present, the two species can be differentiated by looking at the underneath sides of the leaves. Red bay has greenish (burnished reddish brown) undersides, whereas sweet bay is whitish.

#### Distribution

*Persea barbonia* is a coastal plain tree, ranging from Maryland to Florida, and along the Gulf Coast to Texas.

#### Habitat

Red bay is frequently encountered as an understory tree in coastal hardwood mineral flats, maritime swamps and on the margins of bottomland hardwood forests. In Virginia's hardwood mineral flats, red bay is associated with canopy trees such as red maple (*Acer rubrum*) Wetland Flora No. 91-5 / May 1991, sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) Wetland Flora No. 92-1 / January 1992, and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*) No. 97-6 / September 1997. Farther south in the Carolinas, *Persea barbonia* often occurs as a canopy species in freshwater wetlands. When red bay is found in maritime swamps (located on barrier islands or spits), its growth is often stunted by salt spray and low nutrients.

#### Ecological Value / Benefits

The fleshy fruits have limited value as food for birds and small animals.

#### Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *Draft Revision of the National List of Plant Species That Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Persea barbonia* is classified as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)**. FACW plants usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%).

*Persea barbonia* (L.) Sprengel. \_\_\_\_\_



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