

# Technical Report



## Wetland Flora

No. 01-5 / May 2001

Gene Silberhorn

### Pickerelweed

### Tuckahoe

*Pontederia cordata* L.

#### Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Pickerelweed is a fleshy, emergent perennial that usually grows partially submerged in water and rooted in soft sediments. At peak season, the plants most definitive diagnostic characteristics are its dark green, heart-shaped (cordate) foliage and striking spike (subtended by a heart-shaped leaf-like bract) of violet or blue flowers. The upper lobe of the funnel-form petals has a distinct yellow mark. A marsh dominated by this plant will have a definite violet/blue hue during the blooming season (late May to September) because of the multitude of flowering spikes. The leaves, 20 to 40 cm long (8 to 10 in) and 10 to 20 cm wide (4 to 8 in), have an array of delicate veins that parallel each other and the general shape of the leaf or bract. During the growing season, the foliage is very dense in large pickerelweed colonies that attain heights from 60 to 120 cm (2 to 4 feet). *Pontederia* often grows in association with arrow arum (*Peltandra virginica*). Although both species are somewhat similar, they can be easily differentiated. Pickerelweed has heart-shaped leaves and blue flowers and arrow arum has an enclosed (spath) spike (spadix) and triangular shaped leaves with three prominent veins.

#### Distribution

Pickerelweed ranges throughout eastern North America from Canada to South Carolina and Texas.

#### Habitat

*Pontederia cordata* almost always grows in shallow water emerging from a thick rhizome embedded in muddy substrate. In tidewater Virginia, it is most abundant in tidal freshwater or very low saline rivers and creeks. It is frequently associated with arrow arum (*Peltandra virginica*) (Wetland Flora, No.90-6 / November 1990), and less frequently with arrowhead (*Sagittaria latifolia*) (Wetland Flora, No. 91-3 / March 1991), bultongue (*Sagittaria lancifolia*) and northern wildrice (*Zizania aquatica*). These emergents usually grow in a narrow zone between mean high tide and mean sea level (intertidal zone) in tidal freshwater rivers or creeks.

#### Ecological Value/Benefits

Freshwater tidal riverine wetlands of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed are important spawning and nursery areas for anadromous fishes, such as herring, shad and striped bass. Specifically, the reddish bladder-like seeds of pickerelweed are good waterfowl food.

#### Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *Revision of the National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Pontederia cordata* is classified as an **obligate wetland plant (OBL)**. OBLs are plants that almost always occur in wetlands (>99% probability).

*Note: Pickerelweed was first published ten years ago (No.91-5 / May 1991) in black and white. It is repeated this month because of Kent Forrest's accurate and colorful depiction of this very common, yet aesthetic wetland plant.*

*Pontederia cordata* L.

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