

Technical Report



Wetland Flora

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Gene Silberhorn

Lizard's Tail

Saururus cernuus L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Lizard's tails are curious wetlands plants that are especially distinctive when flowering. The generic name, derived from the Greek, *sauros* (lizard) and *oura* (tail), refers to the plants' elongated, white-blooming spike of numerous minute flowers. Also characteristic are the heart-shaped leaves that alternate on the stem of the plant. *Saururus cernuus* grows from 45 to 90 cm (1.5 to 3 feet) with leaves 7 to 15 cm (3 to 6 inches) long. The inflorescence may appear from late May to early August. In seed, (tiny wrinkled fruits), the spike turns a light green then brown just before seeds are shed in autumn. *Saururus* is a perennial herb that may reproduce by seed, or most often by underground rhizomes, forming colonies of clones—genetic duplicates of its parent. The elongated, drooping inflorescence and cordate or heart-shaped leaves are nearly foolproof distinguishing features. There are very few species of herbaceous wetland plants that may be confused with lizard's tail.

Distribution

Saururus cernuus is found in freshwater wetlands throughout most of the eastern United States and southern Canada.

Habitat

Lizard's tail can live partially submersed in shallow water or in saturated soil. It can also tolerate shading and often grows under the canopy of trees in swamps. *Saururus cernuus* can occasionally be found in the intertidal zone (between mean sea level and mean high water) in tidal freshwater wetlands.

Other wetland plants that may be associated with *Saururus* have been featured in the Wetland Flora Series and they are: arrow arum (*Peltandra virginiana*), no. 90-6/November 1990; arrowhead (*Sagittaria latifolia*), no. 91-3/March 1991; tearthumbs (*Polygonum arifolium* and *P. sagittatum*), no. 92-3/March 1992; and pickerel weed (*Pontederia cordata*), no. 91-5/May 1991.

Even if standing water is not present in a wetland, the presence of this species is a good indication that the substrate is soft, saturated and muddy. Associated trees, because of hydric conditions, may have morphological adaptations such as buttressed or fluted trunks, multiple trunks and shallow roots.

Ecological Value/Benefits

Specifically, the seeds of *Saururus* have minor value as a waterfowl food. Surveys have shown that wood ducks feed on the seeds; however, they are not a preferred food.

In Virginia, lizard's tail is most often found as a herbaceous ground cover in semi-permanently flooded palustrine wetlands. In a holistic sense, this species as a component of this wetland type, accrues in part, the functional values of the system, namely flood water retention basins, sediment and nutrient traps, and fish and wildlife habitat.

Hydrophytic Factor/Wetland Indicator Status

As reported in the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia (1988)*, *Saururus cernuus* is classified as an **obligate wetland plant (OBL)**. OBLs are plants that almost always occur in wetlands (99% probability).

Saururus cernuus L.



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