

Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 96-5 / May 1996

Gene Silberhorn

Virginia Willow

Tassel-white / Sweet Spires

Itea virginica

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

The usual growth habit of Virginia willow is a shrub, but it occasionally attains the form of a small tree with a single trunk or stem. The deciduous leaves are simple, alternate and vary from elliptic to oblong and range from 5 to 10 cm in length. Leaf size, shape and margin features may vary even on the same branch. Leaf margins are usually finely serrated, with or without randomly occurring teeth. Young twigs are usually green. Despite one of its common names, this species is not a "willow" (*Salix*), but belongs to the Saxifrage family. From May through June, *Itea* develops a narrow raceme of small white flowers at the tips of branches, therefore the common names tassel-white or sweet spires. Late in the season, toward fall, small, green, elongated capsules appear. By the next spring, the capsules have expelled tiny lustrous brown seeds and have turned a dull brown, but remain attached. The elongated raceme of capsules is an identifiable characteristic in winter, long after leaf fall. The illustration depicts *Itea virginica* in fruit before leaf-fall. Other wetland shrubs such as sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*) and maleberry (*Lyonia ligustrina*) also have racemes of small white flowers and alternate, simple leaves, but the fruits are spherical or globose and not elongated.

Distribution

Itea virginica ranges in wetlands along the Atlantic Coastal Plain from New Jersey to Florida, the Gulf Coast and throughout the Mississippi River Valley to southern Illinois.

Habitat

Virginia willow may be found in swamps, wet woodlands, riverine forested wetlands or along the margins of ponds and lakes. *Itea virginica* is common in tupelo/cypress swamps, adapted to flooded conditions, and is often associated with other hydrophytic shrubs such as swamp rose, *Rosa palustris* (Wetland Flora, No. 95-6 / September 1995), button bush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis* (Wetland Flora, No. 94-10 / November 1994), and alder, *Alnus serrulata* (Wetland Flora, No. 95-5 / July 1995).

Ecological Value / Benefits

Mixed wetland shrub habitats where fleshy fruited shrubs such as elderberry (Wetland Flora, No. 95-3 / March 1995), spice bush (Wetland Flora, No. 94-5 / July 1994), and swamp rose (hips) (Wetland Flora, No. 95-6 / September 1995) coexist with Virginia willow are prime feeding and cover areas for wildlife. Although the somewhat dry fruits of *Itea* are not preferred fare, the shrub community, as a whole, provides cover, particularly for wood ducks during molting when they are not able to fly.

Wetland Indicator Status

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

Itea virginica

*Wetlands Program
School of Marine Science
Virginia Institute of Marine Science
College of William and Mary
Gloucester Point, Virginia 23062
Dr. Carl Hershner, Program Director*

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