

Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 97-5 / July 1997

Gene Silberhorn

Highbush Blueberry

Vaccinium corymbosum L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Vaccinium corymbosum is an erect shrub with one to several trunks that may grow to 15 feet (5 m) tall. Leaves are alternate, simple, elliptic, 4 to 8 cm (1.5 to 3.5 in) long, with predominantly smooth, and very occasionally, finely serrated margins. Young branches are light green with a zig-zag pattern. The branch characteristics are more obvious in winter after leaves have fallen. In spring, clusters of white urn-shaped flowers, 8 to 11 mm (.25 to .5 in) long are evident, a characteristic of the heath (Ericaceae) family. After pollination, the typical juicy, flavorful, blueberry fruit is produced in profusion. Different stages of fruit maturation are common on a single branch, ranging from green to light blue to blue-black with a whitish powder (glaucous). The latter stage is seldom seen because the berries are quickly consumed by birds. Blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) are often confused with huckleberries (*Gaylussacia* spp.). Huckleberries have more hard seeds per berry (usually 10) and have a multitude of shiny, resinous dots or glands on the underneath side of the leaf. Blueberries lack these characteristics.

Distribution

Vaccinium corymbosum is an eastern North American shrub, distributed naturally from Nova Scotia to Wisconsin and south to Texas and Florida.

Habitat

Highbush blueberry is almost always found in fresh water wetlands, usually forested or scrub/shrub wetlands and pocosins, but seldom in dry upland areas. Although it is considered a shrub, it often appears as a small understory tree with a single trunk. Other shrubs associated with this species are alder, *Alnus serrulata*; elderberry, *Sambucus canadensis*, silky dogwood, *Cornus amomum* and Virginia willow, *Itea virginica*. In acidic pocosins, *V. corymbosum* is often associated with other members of the Ericaceae family, such as fetterbushes and maleberries (*Leucothoe* spp.) and (*Lyonia* spp.).

Ecological Values / Benefits

Fleshy fruited plants, including highbush blueberry, are nutritious foods for birds and other wildlife. Other wetland shrubs, such as spicebush, *Lindera benzoin*; elder berry, silky dogwood, paw paw, *Asimina triloba*; hollies (*Ilex* spp.), haws (*Viburnum* spp.) and swamp rose, *Rosa palustris*; are particularly bountiful providers.

Wetland Indicator Status

As listed in the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia 1988*, *Vaccinium corymbosum* is classified as a facultative wetland plant (FACW). FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%)."

Vaccinium corymbosum L.



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

This report was funded, in part, by the Department of
Environmental Quality's Coastal Resources Management
Program through Grant No. NA67OZ0360-01 of the
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration,
Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management,
under the Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended.



Illustration by
Kent Forrest

Printed on
recycled
paper.

