

Reports

5-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Silberhorn, G. (2000) Sweet Bells, Fetterbush, Dog-Hobble *Leucothoe axillaris* (Lam.) D. Don.. Wetland Flora Technical Reports, Wetlands Program, Virginia Institute of Marine Science. Virginia Institute of Marine Science, College of William and Mary. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/m2-3vc3-t012>

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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 00-5 / May 2000

Gene Silberhorn

Sweet Bells Fetterbush Dog-hobble

Leucothoe axillaris (Lam.) D. Don.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

This low, evergreen shrub has several common names, depending mainly on locality within its distribution range. It is generally known as sweet bells or fetterbush in Virginia, the northern most area in its natural distribution. Farther south in South Carolina and Georgia, it is generally known as dog-hobble. The name sweet bells refers to the tiny white, fragrant bell-shaped flowers concentrated at the axils of the alternate, evergreen leaves. The word fetter means to impede. This low growing shrub often grows in dense thickets that would retard the pace of man or beast. Leaf length (1 to 4 inches) and margin characteristics (smooth to serrated) are highly variable. A five-parted, buff-colored capsule is evident in autumn enclosing tiny amber-colored seeds. The illustration depicts a branch in flower-budding stage in late February. The greenish branches have a distinctive zig-zag pattern. Older branches are green on the bottom side and reddish on the top.

Distribution

Leucothoe axillaris is a southern coastal plain, wetland shrub ranging from southeastern Virginia to the Florida northern panhandle and westward along the Gulf to Louisiana.

Habitat

Leucothoe axillaris is a common shrub in coastal forested wetlands. It is often associated with other shrubs such as Virginia willow, *Itea virginica* (Wetland Flora, No.96-5/May 1996), sweetpepper bush, *Clethra alnifolia* (Wetland Flora, No. 99-11/November 1999) or another deciduous fetterbush, *Leucothoe racemosa*. Dense thickets of these shrubs are common in the Great Dismal Swamp and the North Landing River Watershed.

Ecological Value / Benefits

Shrub thickets are good cover for migrating song birds.

Wetland Indicator Status

As listed in the *Draft Revision of the National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Leucothoe axillaris* is classified as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)**. FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%)."

Leucothoe axillaris (Lam.) D. Don.



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This report was funded, in part, by the Department of
Environmental Quality's Coastal Resources Management
Program through Grant No. NA97020181-01 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

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