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Mountain Laurel *Kalmia latifolia* L.

Gene Silberhorn

Virginia Institute of Marine Science

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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 01-7 / July 2001

Gene Silberhorn

Mountain Laurel

Kalmia latifolia L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Mountain laurel is a large shrub or single trunk small tree that grow to 25 feet or more. The trunk(s) and primary branches are usually contorted with dark brown stringy bark in older specimens. Leaves are most often alternate (rarely opposite or whorled), simple, with smooth margins, thick, leathery and evergreen. Leaf size varies from 2 to 5 inches long and 1 to 2 inches wide. Clusters (corymb) of fragrant white to pink flowers appear at the end of branches in spring (April/May). Capsules on 1.5 inch pedicels appear in the fall. In late fall to early winter the capsules split into 5 parts and tiny lustrous brown seeds fall out. The illustration shows *Kalmia* fruiting stage. Mountain laurel is often used as an ornamental. Wood is very hard and has burlled grain.

A closely related smaller shrub, sheep laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*), a rare southern species in Virginia, barely 2 to 4 feet tall, has smaller opposite or whorled leaves and axillary pink or rose colored flower clusters.

Distribution

Kalmia latifolia ranges east of the Mississippi River from the Gulf Coast to New England.

Habitat

As the common name suggests, mountain laurel is most common in the Appalachian Mountains, but can also be found in the Atlantic coastal plain. *Kalmia* typically occupies well drained and even rocky soils, but is occasionally found along streams, seeps on sloped wetlands and on the margins of depression wetlands in the inner coastal plain of Virginia.

Mountain laurel is considered to be an understory shrub or small tree that often grows in dense thickets. Along streams, it may be associated with smooth alder (*Alnus serrulata*) (Wetland Flora, No. 95-5 / July 1995) and on the upper margins of depression wetlands or vernal ponds, it may be found with highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corybosum*) (Wetland Flora, No. 97-5 / July 1997).

Ecological Value/Benefits

Mountain laurel's greatest value is most appreciated when in full bloom. Dense thickets also provide cover for songbirds. The foliage is poisonous to livestock, but deer browse during hard winters.

Wetland Indicator Status

As listed in the *Revision of the National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Kalmia latifolia* is classified as a **facultative upland plant (FACU)**. FACUs "usually occur in non-wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%), but occasionally are found in wetlands (estimated probability 1% - 33%)."

Kalmia latifolia 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*

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