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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 92-11 / November 1992

Gene Silberhorn

Groundsel Tree

Salt Bush / Silvering / Sea Myrtle

Baccharis halimifolia L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Groundsel tree, actually considered a shrub despite one of its common names, grows in the higher areas of salt and brackish coastal marshes. *Baccharis halimifolia* is a tall, robust shrub that may grow to a height of 15 feet, but more typically grows no higher than 6 to 10 feet. The upper leaves are small (0.5 to 1.0 inch long) have relatively smooth margins or a few random teeth. The lower leaves (not illustrated), are longer (1.5 to 2.5 inches), wedged-shaped, alternately arranged, and have several irregular teeth on the upper margins. Twigs are greenish and are slightly ridged, longitudinally. The shrub is dioecious, that is, an individual shrub may produce either female (pistillate) or male (staminate) blooms, but not both. Starting in early or mid-September, beige-yellow flower heads appear, and by late September to early October and continuing until early winter, the silver-white bristles on the seeds of the pistillate shrubs are predominant. The illustration shows *Baccharis* in this late reproductive stage. One of the common names, silvering, well describes this stage in the shrub's life cycle.

Baccharis is often associated with marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*) to form what is collectively known as the 'saltbush community' located in the upper areas of salt or brackish marshes, typically at the marsh/upland ecotone. In this community or assemblage, *Baccharis* can be distinguished from *Iva* in that the latter has thicker, succulent opposite leaves and is not as striking in reproductive stage.

Both *Baccharis* and *Iva* belong to the Aster family (Asteraceae). Very few members of this family in temperate regions are woody, which makes these two shrubs unique in our region. In the tropics, many species of this family are woody and are even trees.

Density and Production

There is very little information in the scientific literature regarding stem density and production of *Baccharis halimifolia*.

Distribution

Baccharis halimifolia is mainly a coastal species, ranging from Massachusetts to Florida and along the Gulf Coast.

Habitat

Groundsel tree predominantly grows in association with marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*) along the tidal marsh/upland border, an easily recognized ecotone community in the Mid-Atlantic States. *Baccharis* is more likely to be found at slightly higher elevations in the marsh than *Iva*. The former is not restricted to saline marshes, but also occupies open coastal, nontidal wetlands, whereas *Iva* is almost always endemic in tidal saline marshes. Wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), is frequently associated with *Baccharis*, but grows at slightly higher elevations in the marsh and often continues into the uplands. Zonation patterns are frequently apparent in the saltbush ecotone; *Iva* at the lowest elevations, then *Baccharis*, with *Myrica* growing in the highest part of the marsh. Saltmeadow hay (*Spartina patens*) (Wetlands Flora, No. 90-4, September 1990) is the typical herbaceous plant growing among saltbushes.

Ecological Values/Benefits

The saltbush community provides diversity for wildlife in general and especially as a nesting area for birds. The long-billed marsh wren typically nests in saltbushes. In salt marshes where trees are scarce, large, isolated saltbush stands occasionally become heron rookeries. One such rookery supported a large number of great blue herons on Virginia's Eastern Shore salt marshes. The site was abandoned after several years, as are most, because excess guano accumulation killed the shrubs. When this happens the birds must locate other nesting sites.

Saltbushes are also notable collectors of flotsam and can be considered the marsh's 'last line of defense' in protecting adjacent uplands from storm surges.

Hydrophytic Factor/Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia* (1988), *Baccharis halimifolia* is classified as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)**. FACW plants usually occur in wetlands (67-99% probability), but are occasionally

Baccharis halimifolia L.



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