Lizard's Tail Saururus cernuus L.

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Lizard's Tail

*Saururus cernuus* L.

**Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics**

Lizard's tails are curious wetland plants that are especially distinctive when flowering. The generic name, derived from the Greek, *sauros* (lizard) and *oura* (tail), refers to the plants' elongated, white-blooming spike of numerous minute flowers. Also characteristic are the heart-shaped leaves that alternate on the stem of the plant. *Saururus cernuus* grows from 45 to 90 cm (1.5 to 3 feet) with leaves 7 to 15 cm (3 to 6 inches) long. The inflorescence may appear from late May to early August. In seed, (tiny wrinkled fruits), the spike turns a light green then brown just before seeds are shed in autumn. *Saururus* is a perennial herb that may reproduce by seed, or most often by underground rhizomes, forming colonies of clones—genetic duplicates of its parent. The elongated, drooping inflorescence and cordate or heart-shaped leaves are nearly foolproof distinguishing features. There are very few species of herbaceous wetland plants that may be confused with lizard's tail.

**Ecological Value/Benefits**

Specifically, the seeds of *Saururus* have minor value as a waterfowl food. Surveys have shown that wood ducks feed on the seeds; however, they are not a preferred food.

In Virginia, lizard's tail is most often found as a herbaceous ground cover in semi-permanently flooded palustrine wetlands. In a holistic sense, this species as a component of this wetland type, accrues in part, the functional values of the system, namely flood water retention basins, sediment and nutrient traps, and fish and wildlife habitat.

**Distribution**

*Saururus cernuus* is found in freshwater wetlands throughout most of the eastern United States and southern Canada.

**Habitat**

Lizard's tail can live partially submersed in shallow water or in saturated soil. It can also tolerate shading and often grows under the canopy of trees in swamps. *Saururus cernuus* can occasionally be found in the intertidal zone (between mean sea level and mean high water) in tidal freshwater wetlands.

**Hydrophytic Factor/Wetland Indicator Status**

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