

Reports

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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 96-3 / March 1996

Gene Silberhorn

Black Willow

Salix nigra Marsh.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Large black willow trees have a rather disheveled-looking silhouette in winter created by the multiple branches, suckers and shoots that come off the trees divided or multiple trunks. Multiple trunks originating from shallow roots is a common habit characteristic for this tree. The wood is soft and brittle, decaying readily, resulting in splintered or broken branches and trunks, especially after ice storms and strong winds. The ridged, furrowed bark of mature trees is dark brown to nearly black. Young branches are brown to reddish-brown, slender and flexible, a typical feature of most willows. Narrow, pointed leaves with serrated margins are alternately arranged on the branches. In the spring, leaf-like appendages called stipules appear at the base of the leaf petioles, exfoliating as the season progresses.

Distribution

Salix nigra is a widely distributed species, ranging from the southern Maritime Provinces of Canada, west to central Minnesota, south to Texas and east to northern Florida. It is found in various types of fresh water wetlands.

Habitat

Black willow can be found in various wetland habitats, but is most likely observed along streams flowing through open areas such as pastures. *Salix nigra* often invades cutover bottomland hardwood

forests, sometimes gaining at "foothold" over other tree seedlings by stump suckering or coppice sprouting. The typical multitrunk characteristic of this tree often reflects this mode of vegetative reproduction. Black willow is a frequent associate tree in forested wetlands but seldom occurs as a dominant canopy species. In riparian forested wetlands, this tree may occur with sycamore, *Platanus occidentalis* (Wetland Flora, No. 94-1 / January 1994); green ash, *Fraxinus pennsylvanica* (Wetland Flora, No. 94-4 / May 1994), red maple, *Acer rubrum* (Wetland Flora, No. 91-7 / July 1991) or American elm, *Ulmus americana* (Wetland Flora, No. 94-8 / September 1994).

Ecological Values / Benefits

In addition to serving as cover and nesting areas for birds, the bark, tender twigs and buds are food for browsers such as deer, rabbits and beaver. Dead snags are ideal homes for cavity dwellers. Streamside wooded buffer zones also serve as interceptors of runoff and excess nutrients from nonpoint sources such as farm fields.

Hydrophytic Factor / Wetland Indicator Status

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

Salix nigra Marsh.



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