

Reports

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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 99-11 / November 1999

Gene Silberhorn

Sweetpepper Bush

Clethra alnifolia L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Sweetpepper bush is a coastal freshwater shrub with simple, deciduous, alternate leaves (3 to 6 inches long) and serrated margins. It often grows in dense thickets from 3 to 10 feet tall. In mid-summer, the shrub produces a terminal inflorescence (raceme) of small, white fragrant flowers. By late summer or early fall, green, globular capsules (1/8- 1/4 in. wide) appear (as illustrated) and turn gray by late autumn/early winter. Sweetpepper bush gets its name from its fragrant flowers (sweet) and 'pepper' from its gray, peppercorn-shaped capsules in winter. The elliptic, serrated leaves resemble the leaves of smooth alder, *Alnus serrulata* (Wetlands Flora, No. 95-5, July 1995), however alder does not produce white flowers or peppercorn-like fruits, so there is no mistaking the differences between the two shrubs. *Clethra* is easily recognized in winter because the terminal raceme of peppercorn-like capsules remain on the shrub until the following spring.

Distribution

Clethra alnifolia is mainly a coastal shrub, ranging from Maine to Florida and along the Gulf Coast to Texas.

Habitat

Sweetpepper bush is most likely found in wooded wetlands in coastal Virginia, but can grow elsewhere in non-wetland areas. It is the dominant shrub in the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina. Dense thickets exist there that are difficult to penetrate during the growing season. In the Swamp, it is often associated with fetterbush (*Lyonia lucida*) and coastal sweetbells (*Leucothoe axillaris*).

Ecological Value/Benefits

Dense thickets of this shrub offer excellent cover for wildlife, especially migrating songbirds.

Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *Draft Revision of the National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Clethra alnifolia* is considered to be a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)** throughout most of its coastal distribution range. FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability (67%-99%)."

Clethra alnifolia L.



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