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Technical Report

Wetland Flora



No. 96-7 / July 1996

Gene Silberhorn

Cane

Arundinaria gigantea (Walt.) Muhl.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Cane is coarse, perennial grass that is considered to be a native bamboo. *Arundinaria* is not as robust or "leafy" as Asian bamboo species, but established undisturbed colonies or brakes may grow up to 15 feet tall. The flat, acutely tapering pale green leaves range from 4 to 10 inches long and are attached to sheaths which surround the stem (culm) or branches of the culm. Leaves often remain green through mild winters, but turn brown during severely cold temperatures. As the culm matures and grows taller, shedding its leaves and sheaths, the characteristic jointed/woody, "cane pole" appearance becomes obvious. Typical of bamboos, *Arundinaria* seldom flowers, usually only every 10 to 15 years. This rare event occurred in several locations in Tidewater Virginia in the spring of 1995. It has been reported that the plant dies after flowering. Cane is seldom confused with other tall wetland grasses because other species usually go through a seasonal reproductive period. Other tall grasses may resemble *Arundinaria*, such as reed grass (*Phragmites australis*), but they usually have a characteristic terminal flowering head at maturity and the culms are not woody. The taxonomic treatment of this grass varies in botanical literature where several subspecies may be recognized.

Distribution

Arundinaria gigantea ranges throughout southeastern United States, reaching to southern Maryland on the east coast to southern Ohio in the mid-west.

Habitat

Cane is almost always found in wetlands, particularly wooded areas or on the margins of swamps. It often appears as dense colonies or canebrake in the Great Dismal and the Chowan River Watershed (the Blackwater, Nottoway and Meherrin rivers in Virginia). *Arundinaria* often develops an extensive rhizome system that produces many shoots that result in canebrake. Dense stands of this grass are frequently the dominant ground cover in forested wetlands of the outer coastal plain of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Cane rarely grows in flooded conditions, but responds well in saturated soil.

Ecological Value/Benefits

Canebrakes are one of the habitats for the canebrake rattlesnake, *Crotalus horridus atricaudatus*, an endangered species in Virginia. Canebrakes are also excellent cover areas for other species of wildlife. Young, tender cane shoots are grazed upon by deer in early spring.

Wetland Indicator Status

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

Arundinaria gigantea (Walt.) Muhl.



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