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Button Bush Cephalanthus occidentalis L.

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Technical Report

Wetland Flora

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Button Bush

***Cephalanthus occidentalis* L.**

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Button bush is a broad-leaved, deciduous shrub that grows up to 2 meters tall with an open spreading canopy. The simple, smooth marginate leaves are usually oppositely arranged throughout the lower branches, and are typically whorled (3 or 4 leaves at a node) just below the terminal borne fruit or flowering heads. Leaf petioles are often red during the peak flowering period when the white globose heads develop in July and August. In late August to September, the flowering heads mature to become compact, greenish, ball-like fruiting heads. By late autumn to early winter, the fruiting heads dry, turn brown, and eventually disintegrate into minute dry fruits called achenes. Button bush should not be confused with other wetland shrubs because of the combined diagnostic characteristics of whorled leaves, globose flowering and fruiting heads. Silky dogwood (*Cornus amomum*) and swamp loosestrife (*Decodon verticillatus)* have opposite leaves, but do not have ball-like flowers or fruits. Also, the latter is only semi-woody and does not branch.

Distribution

Cephalanthus occidentalis is distributed throughout most of the eastern half of the United States from Florida to the Maritime Provinces of Canada, west to the Great Lake States and south to Mexico.

Habitat

Button bush may occupy several different types of wetland habitats, including tidal and nontidal marshes, scrub/shrub and forested wetlands, and the margins of lakes, ponds, ditches and streams. In bottomland, hardwood forests dominated by tupelo (*Nyssa aquatica*) and bald cypress, *Cephalanthus occidentalis* is often associated with other hydrophytic shrubs such as swamp rose (*Rosa palustris*) and alder (*Alnus serrulata*). *Cephalanthus* frequently predominates in scrub/shrub wetlands where it may be associated with other shrubs such as swamp loosestrife, silky dogwood, swamp rose, alder and Virginia willow (*Itea virginica*).

Ecological Value / Benefits

Button bush frequently occupies the shrub strata of several different wetland types, therefore the broad range of ecological values attributed to wetlands in general may be accrued to this species.

Specifically, button bush flowers have high value for nectar gathering insects, the seeds are eaten by mallards and deer browse the foliage.

Hydrophytic Factor / Wetland Indicator Status

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

Cephalanthus occidentalis L.

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Illustration by Kent Forrest

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