Technical Report

Wetland Flora

No. 00-11 / November 2000

Gene Silberhorn

Willow Oak

***Quercus phellos* L.**

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Willow oak is so named because its leaves are narrow and willow-like in general appearance. However, the resemblance ends there, this tree is a true oak, producing acorns like other members of the family (Fagaceae). Mature trees may be up to 100 feet tall with a spreading crown and dark gray, fissured bark. Leaves are deciduous, not lobed, but with smooth margins and bristle tipped, vary from 2 to 5 inches long, dark green above and pale green below. Blade width is usually broadest at or just below mid-length. The acorn cup is shallow and saucer-shaped, enclosing only the base of the nut portion of the acorn. A similar species, laurel oak, *Q. laurifolia* is similar to *Q. phellos* but has leaves that are broadest near the apex of the blade, tend to be somewhat evergreen and are not usually bristle tipped. Laurel oak is less common than willow oak in coastal Virginia and is a more southern species. Willow oak is frequently planted as a shade tree along city streets and parks.

Distribution

Quercus phellos ranges along the Atlantic Seaboard from Georgia to New Jersey and in the Lower Mississippi River Watershed.

Habitat

Willow oak grows in both upland and wetland habitats. It often appears as an associated canopy tree in coastal hardwood/pine mineral flats that are dominated by loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*), red maple (*Acer rubrum)* and sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

Ecological Values/Benefits

Acorns produced by all oak species are considered to be prime wildlife food.

Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *Draft Revision of The National List of Plants Species that Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Quercus phellos* is classified as a **facultative plant (FAC).** FACs are plants that are “equally likely to occur in wetlands or non-wetlands (estimated probability 34%-66%).”

Quercus phellos L.

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Illustration by Kent Forrest

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