
Wildflower Spot –November 2017
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

GROUNDSEL TREE

Baccharis halimifolia

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Covered with silky white tufts, this shrub is striking, along with goldenrods and other fall-blooming flowers. In late October, the female plant produces these fruits and their coverings. As the fall flowers fade, the silvery appearance of Groundsel Tree persists into winter. Earlier in the fall the male flowers were on another nearby plant - small, yellowish and rounded, they are shriveled by the time the female flowers are forming fruits.

Groundsel Tree has many common names, “groundsel” referring to the cottony tufts on the female plant. Many plants with fuzzy white fruits have “groundsel” in their names – the most common being the introduced weed Common Groundsel *Senecio vulgaris* and Golden Ragwort *Packera aurea*. Other names are Salt-bush, Sea-myrtle and Silverling, a name which best describes the appearance of this small tree in the fall. “Salt-bush” is appropriate, as this plant thrives along roads with heavy salt applications in winter.

This is a plant of coastal areas, growing wherever the soil is moist, the edges of ponds and salt- and fresh-water marshes, but also roadside ditches, old fields and other disturbed areas. Tolerant of drought, heat, and salt spray, Groundsel Tree forms the saltbush zone on the margin of marshes, along with Marsh Elder (*Iva frutescens*).

In nature, male and female shrubs will be growing near each other, since both sexes are required to form fruit. The pollen of Groundsel Tree can be

carried on the wind, which also disperses the seed. Growing vigorously in full sun, in some areas the plant is considered a weed. It is common in the Coastal Plain and ranges to Florida and Texas.

Easy to grow, and tolerant of poor soil, this is a shrub for a home garden with wet habitat and space for several specimens, probably best used in informal screens or mass border plantings.

Plantings of Groundsel Tree will form a barrier against deer – they will not eat this shrub, since the foliage contains toxic substances they have learned to avoid. The male flowers have rich nectar that attracts bees, wasps, hoverflies, butterflies, and other insects seeking food in late summer.

Migrant warblers feed on insects that supply protein for their long journeys. With a stunning display of feathery fruits in the fall, the plant could be part of a careful landscape plan. ❖



Female plant



Male plant

Photo: Groundsel Tree (*Baccharis halimifolia*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.