
Wildflower Spot – December 2010
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

GLASSWORT/PICKLEWEED/SAMPHIRE

Salicornia virginica (= *S. europaea*)

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

One of several low-growing, annual succulent plants composed of single or branched fleshy, jointed, jade-green stems with an erect main stem. In the past, the name *Salicornia virginica* has mistakenly been applied to woody glasswort, a perennial species with stems that trail along the ground.

Leaves are essentially absent, reduced to a pair of blunt scales at each joint, and in the upper part of the plant, a cluster of three tiny flowers appears to the naked eye as a yellow dot above each leaf scale. The entire plant turns yellow to red in autumn, forming masses of color in the salt marshes.

These plants are found only in salt or brackish marshes. Their succulent stems have the ability to store a large volume of water, which helps the plant maintain a critical water balance, necessary because of the salty soil in which it grows. The physiology of the plant is such that it cannot survive in freshwater areas.

Seeds of glasswort germinate best at low salinities when exposed to air, conditions which exist in April when the tides are lowest and heavy rains lower the salinity of the marsh soils. The seeds have only four days to germinate and produce a root long enough to attach the seedlings to the substrate. If not well

established, the seeds will be washed away by the next high tide.

In Virginia, glasswort is found only in counties with coastal marshes. The plant is common in salt marshes from Quebec to Florida and in salty soil inland to Michigan; also from Alaska to California; also widespread in the Old World. Blooms August-November.

The name is composed of *sal*, salt, and *cornu*, a horn -- saline plants with horn-like branches. *Wort* is an old word for plant, hence "salt plant". The stem is translucent, and resembles green glass; however, the common name comes from the fact that this plant was reduced to ashes to provide alkali (carbonate of soda) needed in glass-making. The salty stems are eaten raw or cooked and pickled. ❖



Photo: Glasswort (*Salicornia virginica*) taken by Helen Hamilton on Eastern Shore
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