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

PICKEREL-WEED

Pontederia cordata

Pontederiaceae (Water-hyacinth Family)

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

In late summer and fall, the tall blue spikes of Pickerel-Weed are distinctive in aquatic habitats. Blooming from the bottom up, the deep blue flowers are nectar sources for butterflies. This native perennial is often 3 feet tall, with long, heart-shaped leaves.

A good wetland plant, Pickerel-weed grows in marshes, shallow water and freshwater ditches, from Nova Scotia to Minnesota to South America. It is found in the coastal and piedmont counties in Virginia, and blooms June-November. The preferred growing conditions are full to partial sun and shallow water to wet mucky soil. Pickerel-weed is an emergent aquatic plant that doesn't like to dry out.

The large edible seeds are eaten occasionally by various ducks, including the mallard, black duck, green-winged teal, and wood duck. Muskrats and white-tailed deer occasionally browse on the foliage. When this plant forms dense colonies, it provides cover for fish and other aquatic wildlife.

Pickerel-weed has often been used for food. Each fruit contains a nutritious, starchy seed that can be eaten straight from the plant or dried and added to granola and other cereals. The dried seeds can also be boiled, roasted or ground into flour. The young leaves have some-



times been eaten raw in salads or boiled and served with butter, and the seeds can be eaten like nuts.

The common name suggests that this plant, as well as the fish known as pickerel, occupy the same habitat.

This species is related to the infamous Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), which clogs waterways in many areas of southeastern United States. The introduced Water Hyacinth has similar blue-violet flowers (although larger in size), but it has stubby leaves that float on water. ❖

Photo: Pickerel-weed (*Pontederia cordata*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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