Natural Heritage Resources Factsheet

Swamp Pink (*Helonias bullata*)

Description

Swamp pink is one of Virginia's most stunning native wildflowers. A member of the Lily family, it is a perennial evergreen herb. Its oblong leaves grow at ground level in a radiating cluster, called a rosette. The leaves persist through the winter. Young leaves are bright green and may be 3-10 inches long; older dark green leaves may reach a length of 16 inches. During the winter, the leaves sometimes turn red-brown and often lie flat on the ground. Small pink flowers with lilac-colored anthers, or pollen producing structures, grow in dense clusters at the end of a long, hollow, leafless stem. The stem length ranges from 8-35 inches at flowering and can be 60 inches by the time seeds mature. Swamp pink blooms in April and May.

Habitat

Swamp pink is found in perennially saturated, spring-fed, nutrient-poor, shrub swamps and forested wetlands. Typically, swamp pink grows with such species as sphagnum moss, red maple, spicebush, greenbrier, black gum, and various wetland ferns and sedges. It requires stable water levels and can tolerate only brief or infrequent flooding. In Virginia, populations of swamp pink are found in the mountains and the coastal plain.

Distribution

Swamp pink is found in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Formerly, it also occurred in New York, but is now extirpated there. Northern populations are found primarily in the coastal plain; southern populations are concentrated in the mountains. New Jersey and Virginia have coastal plain and mountain populations. In Virginia, swamp pink is known from four counties: Augusta, Nelson, Caroline, and Henrico.

Life History

Reproduction of swamp pink is primarily by vegetative means. New rosettes grow from underground stems, called rhizomes. The new plants emerge very close to the parent plant. Reproduction through seed appears to play a lesser role in maintaining a population. One reason for this is that relatively few plants flower. Another is that seeds and seedlings have a low survival rate. Seed dispersal appears to be limited; observers have noted seeds fall to the ground immediately around the plant. However, fat content of the seeds is high, which allows them to float. One study has shown that ants prefer swamp pink seeds over other seeds, suggesting that ants may play a role in seed dispersal.

Conservation

Swamp pink is currently listed as endangered by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As a wetland-dependent species swamp pink is susceptible to activities which have major influences on water quality or quantity. While many activities are compatible with swamp pink conservation, activities which increase sedimentation, pollutant runoff, or cause flooding of habitat should be avoided. Vehicular and foot traffic are best directed away from these areas. Dambuilding by beavers is also a potential threat to swamp pink habitat.

Landowners and managers can take positive steps to ensure conservation of swamp pink and its habitat. Knowledge of the presence of rare species and use of Best Management Practices contribute to informed land use decisions DCR's Division of Natural Heritage maintains a database on the presence of our state's natural heritage occurrences. Natural Heritage biologists, stewardship and protection staff can assist landowners with questions regarding rare species and sensitive habitats. The staff also provides information and expertise concerning conservation and management practices which help to insure we preserve and pass onto future Virginians the rare gifts which are in our care.