Natural Heritage &
Endangered Species
Program

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Division of Fisheries & Wildlife
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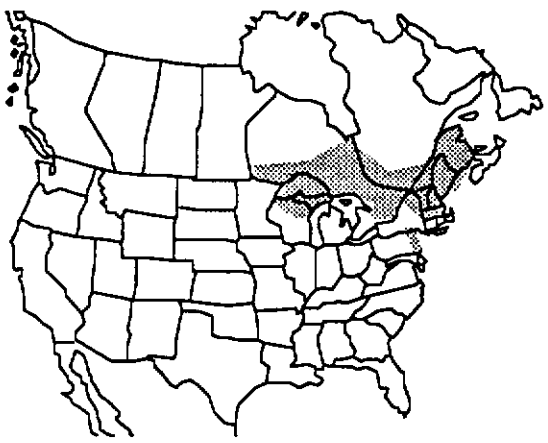
MASSACHUSETTS PLANTS OF SPECIAL CONERN

SANDBAR CHERRY
(*Prunus pumila* L. var. *depressa* (Pursh) Gl.)

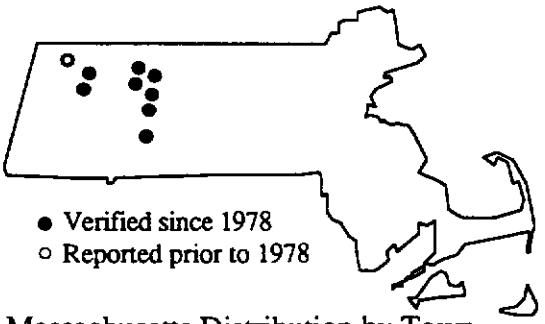
Soper, J.H. Shrubs of Ontario. Royal Ontario Museum.

Description

Sandbar Cherry, a member of the Rose family (Rosaceae), is a low (up to 2 m high), deciduous shrub that forms mats or spreading bushes up to 2 m (6 1/2 ft.) in breadth. (In Massachusetts, Sandbar Cherry grows only to 1 m in height.) The main stems are prostrate, and the new shoots that grow from them are often reddish and very lustrous. Its alternate, pale green leaves are simple, narrowly oblanceolate (a bit wider toward the top), and somewhat whitened below. The five-petalled, white flowers are 1.2-1.5 cm (5/10 - 6/10 in.) broad and occur in clusters of two to four blossoms. Flowering season is from early May to early June. The red-purple to purple-black cherries ripen in late summer or early fall. The Sandbar Cherry is a variety of the Sand Cherry (*Prunus pumila* L.).



Documented Range of Sandbar Cherry
(*Prunus pumila* L. var. *depressa*)



Massachusetts Distribution by Town

Range

The documented range of Sandbar Cherry extends from New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Quebec to Ontario, northern Wisconsin, Massachusetts, northern New York, and eastern Pennsylvania.

Similar Species

Similar species include Sandbar Willow (*Salix exigua*) and other species of cherries. The Sandbar Willow--a shrubby, colonial species--has very long, sharply pointed narrow leaves that are from 5-10 mm (1/5 - 2/5 in.) wide; in contrast, the leaves of Sandbar Cherry are commonly 1-2 cm (2/5 - 4/5 in.) wide. Different species of *Prunus* may appear similar but will be found in different habitats. Finally, Sandbar Cherry may be separated from other varieties of *P. pumila* L. by its leaves, the growth habit of its stems, and its range and habitat. The leaves of Sandbar Cherry are many times greater in length than they are in width. In contrast, the Appalachian Cherry (*P. pumila* L. var. *cuneata*) has oblong or oblong-obovate leaves. Furthermore, the Appalachian Cherry variety is an erect plant and grows in dry sandy or rocky clearings. The remaining two varieties of this polymorphic species do not overlap the Sandbar Cherry's range.

Habitat in Massachusetts

Habitats include flood-scoured areas of islands, shores and peninsulas in the Connecticut and Deerfield Rivers. Examples include the edge of a floodplain forest; traprock ledges in a river channel; a sand flat; riverbed cobbles and gravels at or near the floodline; a sloping rock slab just above a sandy beach; and a rock floodplain island. Somewhat atypically, one station occurs along railroad tracks, beside a canal. Almost all these habitats experience annual spring flooding. Associated plants include various goldenrods, asters, willows, Big Bluestem (*Andropogon Gerardi*), and Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*). Additional associates include saplings of Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*), Sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis* L.), and Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*).

Population Status

Sandbar Cherry is presently listed as a "Special Concern" species in Massachusetts. A "Special Concern" species is one that is not currently considered to be endangered or threatened but that is rare and may become threatened in the state--due to an ongoing decline in the species, small numbers of the plants, or limited habitat. There are 10 current stations (relocated or discovered since 1978) and one historical station (unverified since 1978) in the Commonwealth--all but one in Franklin County. (Ten of the current stations are located in eight towns, and most previously "historical" stations have been relocated.) Sandbar Cherry is also considered rare in New York, and at least one of the four varieties of the species is considered to be rare in about a dozen other states. Forest succession and, especially, further impoundment of rivers can threaten populations of Sandbar Cherry.