

Sweet Bay Magnolia

Magnolia virginiana

Description

Sweet bay magnolia is a semi-evergreen tree that is often multistemmed and may grow to 65 feet (20 meters) tall, but in Pennsylvania is usually much smaller. The leaves are alternately arranged, thickish in texture, untoothed on the margin, noticeably whitish on the lower surface, elliptic in shape, and from 3 to 5 inches (7.5-13 cm) long. The fragrant white flowers, appearing in May and June, are relatively large and showy, approximately 2 to 3 inches (5-7.5 cm) wide. The fruit is a 2 inch (5 cm) cone-like structure containing seeds that have a red or orange outer covering.



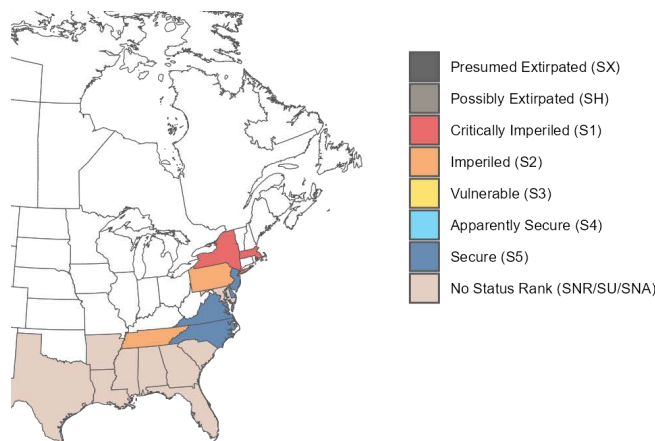
Photo source: R. Harrison Wiegand

Distribution & Habitat

Sweet bay magnolia has a coastal range from southern New England west and south into Texas and Florida. In Pennsylvania, it represents a southerly species and has been documented in several southeastern counties. It occurs in wetlands, particularly swamps and seepy woodlands.

North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe 2025



Current State Status

The PA Biological Survey (PABS) considers sweet bay magnolia to be a species of special concern, based on the few occurrences that have been recently confirmed, its limited state range, and its wetland habitat. It has a PA legal rarity status and a PABS suggested rarity status of Threatened. About 20 populations, most with few individuals, have been documented in the state.

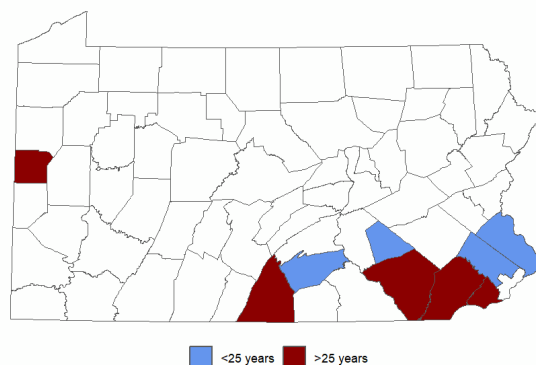
Conservation Considerations:

The viability of populations of sweet bay magnolia and its habitat type will be enhanced by creating buffers around wetlands, controlling invasive species, and protecting the hydrology of the wetland and its surroundings. Excessive deer browse may be threat in some locations. Populations of sweet bay magnolia occurring west of the Coastal Plain in the state have significance for plant geography and possibly for genetic diversity.

NatureServe conservation status ranks

G5 – Globally secure; S2 – Imperiled in Pennsylvania

Sweet Bay Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*)



References

- NatureServe. 2025. NatureServe Explorer [web application] NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available at <https://explorer.natureserve.org> (Accessed: May 8, 2025)
- Rhoads, A.F. and T.A. Block. 2007. The Plants of Pennsylvania: An Illustrated Manual. 2nd edition. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.