



Widgeon Grass

What is it?

Widgeon grass is one of the most common Bay grasses. It is found in shallow waters. Most probably it got its name because it is a favorite food of the dabbling duck we call a widgeon (or widgeon).

What does it look like?

There are two forms of widgeon grass that you can find in the Chesapeake Bay. One form looks like an umbrella of very thin leaves. These slender leaves are strung along a very thin stem. In the other form, its leaves look like they come directly out of the bottom of the Bay. They do not have stems. Like eelgrass, widgeon grass has a root system of rhizomes (or knobby underground stems that grow horizontally).

From July to September, these plants have flowers that you can see at the base of the leaves.

Where can you find it?

Widgeon grass grows in many different parts of the Bay. It grows near the shore in fresh as well as salt water, and many places in between—including ditches. In fact, it gets one of its names—ditch grass—because of this.

What does it do?

Widgeon grass, like all other submerged aquatic vegetation, is similar to plants that grow on the land—with some important differences. Land plants have a waxy outer skin on their stems and leaves (called a cuticle). Widgeon grass doesn't have this skin covering. Gases and nutrients can easily pass from the plant to the water and vice versa. In addition, this lacy Bay grass has special air filled spaces inside its leaves and stems. They help the leaves and stem float in the water.

Just by being there, widgeon grass serves a useful function. Its rhizomes anchor soils and sediments at the bottom of the Bay. This helps keep the water clear. This grass also produces oxygen that other creatures need to survive. When it exists in large clusters, it helps lessen the effects of waves, preventing land erosion and keeping larvae such as young crabs and fish from being destroyed.

What does it eat?

Widgeon grass survives by creating its own food through a process called photosynthesis. In this process, plants take in carbon dioxide and water. With the help of sunlight absorbed by a green pigment called chlorophyll, they then produce oxygen and carbohydrates for their own uses, and release oxygen and water vapor into the air.

Because of this, widgeon grass and other plants are called primary producers. They produce their own food.

What eats it?

Widgeon grass has a high nutritional value, making it one of the more valuable food sources for ducks and geese. In fact, it probably was named after one duck—the widgeon—who love to dine on this plant. In addition, as it decays and dies, widgeon grass provides an important food source for many small animals (including worms and arthropods) that are an important part of Bay food chains.

Flora-fact

Like many kinds of SAV, widgeon grass was once considered a nuisance in the Bay. Boaters often found that their motors were tangled up by its waving leaves. However, we now realize this plant and its cousins create underwater meadows that all kinds of animals need to grow and survive.

