

# GUIDE TO MARINE INVADERS IN RI COASTAL WATERS

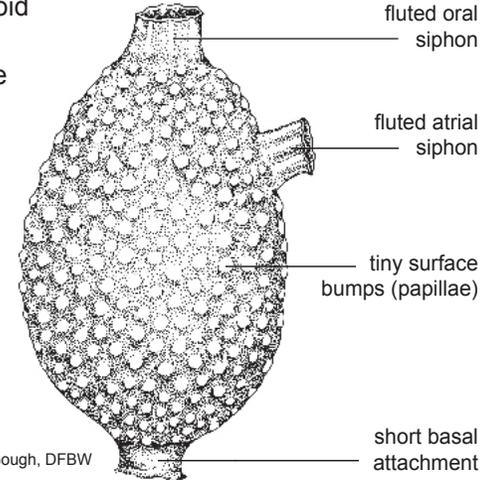
## *Ascidia aspersa* European sea squirt, tunicate



Robert Buchsbaum

### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

- Thin, grayish, semi-translucent, exterior with pinkish hue, often covered with debris
- Firm, rigid surface with tiny bumps (papillae)
- Two prominent siphons: a fluted oral siphon at top, and fluted atrial siphon located 1/3 of the way down the side of the body
- Variable shape; typically ovoid or egg-shaped
- Adheres to substrate on one end by basal attachment
- Grows up to 2 in (5 cm)



*Ascidia aspersa*

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### HABITAT PREFERENCE

- Found in shallow, subtidal waters attached to docks, pilings, ropes, and other submerged structures
- Prefers calm, protected waters with steady current
- Occurs in both marine and estuarine waters

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## *Ascidella aspersa* European sea squirt, tunicate

### INVASION STATUS & ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS

*Ascidella aspersa*, a native of Europe, was most likely introduced to the United States shorelines from hull fouling and/or ballast water discharge. It was first discovered in New England waters in the 1980's, and it can now be found in the Gulf of Maine from Massachusetts to Connecticut. Like other invasive tunicates, *A. aspersa* is a tough competitor that outcompetes and replaces native solitary tunicates. This species is able to withstand variable salinities, enabling it to spread to estuaries. *A. aspersa* is a fouling organism on ship hulls, anchor chains, marina floats, shellfish beds, and other firm surfaces.

### SIMILAR SPECIES

***Styela clava*:** Elongate colonies of *Ascidella aspersa* may be mistaken for the solitary tunicate *Styela clava* (club tunicate), particularly when covered with encrusting debris. Perhaps the most helpful feature for distinguishing these species is the presence of two prominent, closely positioned siphons on the apex of *Styela clava*, vs. siphons separated by 1/3 of body length in *Ascidella aspersa*.

***Ciona intestinalis*:** *Ascidella aspersa* may be mistaken for *Ciona intestinalis*, another invasive, solitary tunicate. However, *C. intestinalis* always has yellow marks around the siphons and is typically more slender and not as firm as *A. aspersa*.

***Molgula spp.*:** Small specimens of *A. aspersa* may also be mistaken for *Molgula spp.* (sea grapes). However, *Molgula spp.* are spherically shaped with two siphons very close together at the top of their body.

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*Styela clava* (club tunicate)  
encrusted with debris



Andrew Martinez