

Clethra: Sweet Summer Fragrance

By Susan Camp

Everyone has a problem area in the yard-- a place that is too wet or too dry, too sandy or too clayey, too sunny or too shady. We have several of those impossible spots on our property. We have spent a lot of time and money on plants, and ended up having to move them to new locations. Gardening is an ongoing learning experience and teachable moments arise every season.

Our shoreline along Cedarbush Creek is one problem area. It is totally natural, with native marsh grasses, wax myrtles, red cedars, pines, American hollies, and wild blueberries growing along the shore. Our small peninsula that juts out into the creek is centered with a large, spreading white oak. It sounds pretty and the shade is a blessing on summer afternoons, but it means we can't grow grass in the sandy, root-filled soil. We can grow moss, which is attractive, but we need to find a colorful, trouble-free shrub to soften the austerity of the landscape. We planted azaleas around our gazebo years ago, and they are gorgeous in the spring, but the rest of the year they don't show much.

This summer we are looking for flowering shrubs that might work in that area. One possibility is sweet pepperbush or summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), an eastern North America native that was the Virginia Native Plant Society Wildflower of the Year for 2015. *Clethra* is a deciduous shrub that in the wild grows in marshes, swampy woods, and along stream banks in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 through 9. *Clethra* grows well in full sun to part shade in medium to wet, well-drained, acidic, sandy soils. *Clethra* will tolerate full shade, salt, and is deer resistant. It will grow in wet clay, although adding compost to the soil will improve performance.

Native *Clethra* reaches 3 to 8 feet in height, with a spread of 4 to 6 feet. Smaller cultivars have been developed, including 'Hummingbird' at 30 to 40 inches tall. The oblong leaves are glossy green, turning to golden brown in the fall. Spicy-sweet scented panicles of white blossoms bloom in mid to late summer, attracting butterflies for nectar and bees for nectar and pollen, making *Clethra* a significant contributor to honey production. Birds eat the dark brown seed capsules.

Clethra is easily propagated from softwood cuttings taken in early to mid summer. The flowers bloom on new wood, so *Clethra* should be pruned in late winter.

Taller *Clethra* cultivars like the deep rose 'Ruby Spice' and the pale pink 'Pink Spires' can be planted as a hedge or as tall border plants. *Clethra* works well near streams, ponds, and as rain garden plants. Smaller and dwarf varieties make a fragrant addition to a bed or border when planted among other pollinator-attracting perennials. Planted near a deck, pool, or patio, *Clethra* will provide pleasant fragrance on summer evenings. Since *Clethra* is a native plant, it works well in naturalized and informal settings, such as cottage gardens. *Clethra* is a good choice to help prevent erosion.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication HORT-84P “Selecting Plants for Virginia Landscapes: Showy Flowering Shrubs” provides information on Clethra and several other shrubs. The Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS) website article “Wildflower of the Year 2015, Clethra alnifolia, (Sweet Pepperbush)” offers detailed information on this lovely native shrub. Clemson Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 1090 “Summersweet Clethra” contains planting information and vivid color photographs of several cultivars.

Native plants should not be removed from the wild. Buy native plants from nurseries that grow their plants from seed. The VNPS website offers a list of retail and wholesale nurseries and vendors of native plants.

Will Clethra become our shrub of choice to plant near the creek? We have concerns about whether the soil is wet enough and whether there will be enough afternoon shade, so we are looking at several other options, as well. This time we want to find the right plant for the right spot.

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