

American Beautyberry is beautiful in the wild and in your garden

If you enjoy walking in the woods, chances are that you have seen American beautyberry or *Callicarpa Americana*, growing in the understory of the forest. The plant is very easy to identify when it is in bloom or producing berries and is generally found under open stands of pines. The scientific name *Callicarpa* is derived from the Greek words *kallos* (beauty) and *karpos* (fruit). It is aptly named because the shrub like plant is very beautiful especially when in bloom or producing fruit.

In Florida, beautyberry is an evergreen that grows to be about 6-8 feet tall. The toothed leaves of the shrub are somewhat large (6-8 inches) and can range in color from green to yellow-green. The leaves are simple and opposite. The shrub produces tiny lilac flowers in the spring time and summer and by autumn the blooms give rise to berries. The fruit of the plant is generally about ¼ inch and grows in clusters of metallic shades of magenta and violet. The clusters encircle the stem of the plant and are attractive to many different types of birds.

American beautyberry can be found in relatively open, well drained woodlands and hammocks. It is an extremely adaptable plant and can grow in soil that is not rich in nutrients. It is drought tolerant and can grow in sun or shade.

This shrub is an excellent choice for low maintenance gardens. It does not require much work and provides beauty year round. The plant attracts many birds and other critters. The berries produced by the plant last long into the winter and being somewhat astringent or bitter, many animals don't eat them until all other food sources have been depleted. The berries are excellent for making jelly and wine.

American beautyberry is also the food plant used by the larvae of many species of butterflies and moths making it a wonderful butterfly garden plant. Birds including robins, catbirds, cardinals, mockingbirds, brown thrashers, finches and towhees are favorite consumers of both the fresh berries and the shriveled ones in later winter. The fruit is also a favorite of white tailed deer and they will forage on it well into the winter months as well.

An interesting fact about the plant is that when the leaves are crushed and rubbed on the skin, it serves as an insect repellent. The plant has been used for centuries by farmers who would cut the branches with the leaves still on them and crush the leaves, then use it on the animals to keep the deerflies, horseflies and mosquitoes away.

Native Americans used the leaf of the plant to make a potion they placed in sweat baths to relieve rheumatism, fevers and malaria. They used the root of the plant to make a tea for dysentery and stomach aches. The berries were made into a tea as well and used for colic.

In addition to being a functional plant, it is very hardy. It can tolerate extremes of heat and cold. It is very rarely bothered by insects or diseases and will survive in most soil types. It can survive in partial shade or full sun. It is easily propagated by seed or cuttings.

So, if you're looking for a plant that requires almost no maintenance and still provides year round beauty, this may be the one for you. It's also a good plant for butterfly gardens and areas where it is difficult to get other less hardy plants to grow. American beautyberry, also called French mulberry, is a wonderful choice for most any garden.

American beautyberry plants will be available on January 9th to those who bring in a bag of air potato bulbs. To find out more about the Air Potato Exchange Day, call 402-6545.