

Sweet Pepper Bush - *Clethra*

Like many another neglected native plant, the beautiful sweet pepperbush improves under cultivation; and when the departed lilacs, syringa, snowball, and blossoming almond, found with almost monotonous frequency in every American garden, leave a blank in the shrubbery at midsummer, these fleecy white spikes should exhale their spicy breath about our homes. But wild flowers, like a prophet, may remain long without honor in their own country. Planted beside lakes and streams on noblemen's estates, how overpowering must their fragrance be in the heavy, moisture-laden air of England! Even in our drier atmosphere, it hangs about the thickets like incense.

- Mrs. Neltje Blanchan (1900)

What's in a name? :

Cinnamon bark *Clethra*;
White alder; Summersweet;
Coastal sweet pepper bush;
Lily of the Valley tree

Family: Clethraceae

Common names in Mexico:

Jaboncillo; Jabon; Palo cucharo;
Aguacatillo; bote; canelo;
cuchara; chicoza; potillo; encino
prieto; jicarillo; madrano;
mameyito; palo cucharo.

Clethra mexicana is the species that grows prolifically in the overwintering monarch reserves in central Mexico. *Clethra alnifolia* -Maine to Texas; *Clethra acuminata* - Appalachian plateau; up to 70 species worldwide

Clethra is a very attractive deciduous shrub whose shiny dark green leaves are alternate, simple and toothed toward the tips and reveal golden fall colors.

Several ornamental cultivars are available: The 'Hummingbird' cultivar was a Georgia Gold Medal Winner first introduced by the great plantsman Fred Galle of Callaway Gardens in Georgia.

Hummingbird *Clethra*'s creamy white flowers are spicy-fragrant when color and fragrance are otherwise very limited.

Doesn't all of nature exfoliate for extreme beauty? *Clethra*'s exfoliating bark is usually cinnamon-colored but occasionally mahogany, gold or pink-tinged.



photo by Chad Campbell,
Appalachian Ecologic
(see beautiful enlargement of
photo here:

[http://appalachianecologic.com/
ecological-land-care/](http://appalachianecologic.com/ecological-land-care/))

Caterpillar Café:
Large lace border Wave
Butterfly; Unicorn

Trying so hard to please you: It is adaptive to a wide range of light, soil, and moisture conditions. Strangely it tolerates full shade. *Clethra* prefers part shade and moist acidic soils but once established, it tolerates, drought-prone exposures or soaked/saturated ones. It is basically trouble-free.

“As bumblebees go from one flower to another at breakneck speed, they cause explosions all over the place, the air is full of tiny pollen clouds, and the whole scene is strongly reminiscent of a Civil War picture or an old Western, full of gun smoke.”

- B. J. D. Meeuse,
The Story of Pollination

Doctor Pepper bush: Herbal lore recorded that Native Americans used spicy seed pods to cure and season dried wild meats.

What a day for a raceme:

Flowers: 3-6" spikes (racemes) of extremely fragrant white blossoms (5 white fused petals) last up to 6 weeks from June to August when others are fading in summer's heat. Fifteen to 100 fragrant flowers form the fluffy bottlebrush-like inflorescences on the current season's growth.

Seeds: Dark brown, dry fruiting capsules aid in winter ID as they persist throughout winter, resembling dried sourwood blossoms a bit.

Why plant Clethra?

A plethora of reasons:

If gardeners continually request it at nursery centers, the market will respond to make it available for the “ka-ching” at the cash registers. Due to habitat destruction, coastal sweet pepperbush is listed threatened in Tennessee and a species of special concern in Maine.

Good neighbor policy: *Clethra* slowly forms a thicket by sending up new shoots and thus provides erosion control along streams and ponds.



A grand online resource for multitudes of flower stories is Wild Flowers - An Aid to Knowledge of Our Wild Flowers and Their Insect Visitors by Mrs. Neltje Blanchan's (1865-1918) via the Project Gutenberg at: www.infomotions.com/etexts/gutenberg/dirs/etext02/wldfl10.htm