

One Very ‘Sweet’ Shrub for the Garden

As the father of 3 teenage children, I have found some of the recent changes of vernacular within the English language to be fascinating. ‘Bank’, no longer refers only to a place that holds money, but describes an event or item that can generate a lot of money. ‘Sweet’ once described only the taste or fragrance of an item, it now refers to something ‘cool’ or looks ‘cool’, to quote the 70’s vernacular of cool! I was chuckling to myself the other day when I smelled the flower of *Calycanthus floridus*, commonly called Sweetshrub. Here, I thought, is a plant that definitely fits all the definitions of the word ‘Sweet’!

Calycanthus floridus is a suckering shrub that reaches 8’ tall and widths to 8’ or greater. The plant is native to Virginia South to Florida and West to Mississippi. The word *Calycanthus* is derived from the Greek *kalyx*, meaning cup and *anthus*, meaning flower. *Floridus* is from the Latin *florid* for flowering. The entire name of the plant refers to the cup-shaped flower! *Calycanthus* is a very ancient shrub, dating back over 100 million years and like Magnolias, the flowers consist of tepals. Tepals are a combination of true petals and the bracts or modified leaves that protect the bud during the winter. These bracts are typically diminutive and provide little ornamental appeal. For Sweetshrub, the bracts have become modified and are indistinguishable from the petals. The flowers are typically 1 ½” in diameter and are burnt red in color. However, it is not the shape or color of the flower that initially beckons your senses, but the fragrance. It has an amazingly fruity fragrance, resembling a cross between that of apple and pineapple, although the intensity of the fragrance is variable. As the day warms, the oils become more volatile, with the strongest fragrance during the afternoon and evening. Often, you will detect the fragrance long before you even see the actual plant and you are led to believe that you are in a tropical island, not a NJ garden!

It is thought that these volatile oils that create this fragrance first evolved within the foliage as a defensive mechanism to prevent predation. The crushed leaves of Sweetshrub are very aromatic and – true to its original intent – it is typically not eaten by deer. It is also very adaptable. In the wild it is found in flood plains and along rocky bluffs in full sun or dense woodlands. Thus, it can tolerate both sun and shade, most soils or dry. It is nearly failsafe! The foliage is not only fragrant, but has a very attractive glossy and dark green appearance with a warm yellow fall color. During autumn, one of my favorite combinations is to pair this with *Euphorbia amygdaloides* ‘Purpurea’, the Wood Spurge. The dark purple foliage of the Euphorbia looks great against the warm yellow of the Sweetshrub.

In addition to the straight species, there are several named selections and crosses on the market that are very garden worthy. All are tolerant of the varying site conditions of the species, but add special interest in flower or foliage. *Calycanthus raulstonii* ‘Hartledge Wine’ is a cross between the Asian cousin *Calycanthus* (formerly *Sinocalycanthus*) *chinensis* and our native species. It offers an attractive wine red, open faced flower that blooms from May through August and reaches heights of 10’! Unfortunately, the flowers lack the wonderful fruity aroma. *Calycanthus floridus* ‘Michael Lindsey’ has very fragrant flowers with an extended bloom period into July. The foliage of Michael Lindsey is more lance-shaped and very attractive, with a clear yellow fall color. Lastly, the cultivar ‘Athens’ offers fragrant yellow flowers.

Sweetshrub is another great native plant that should be in nearly every home garden. With its tropical or fruity fragrance, great foliage, nearly indestructible constitution and prehistoric lineage, it is a plant that my son would truly call 'Sweet'!