

Sweet Pepperbush fragrant and spicy

By Robert Naczi
Special to the State News

Sultry days of late July and August bring the alluring fragrance of Sweet Pepperbush. Deliciously aromatic, the flowers have a unique spicy sweetness, reflected aptly in the plant's common name.

The fragrance is pleasantly strong, but not overpowering. The floral perfume is at its best in the evening when the air is still, warm and humid. What a pleasant way to wind down a hot day!

Sweet Pepperbush is a shrub that grows to nearly 10 feet tall. Though the individual white flowers are small, they are borne in dense spires on the upper parts of the bushes, making a very attractive display. The leaves are deep green and somewhat glossy.

Except in floral aroma, Sweet Pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*) has nothing to do with peppers or spice. Rather, it is a member of the Clethraceae, a small family of about 70 species. It grows naturally from southeastern Canada south to Florida and west to Texas, mostly near the coast. Sweet Pepperbush is common throughout most of Delaware, on the Coastal Plain. Its natural habitats are moist to wet forests, swamps, and their edges. When cultivated, it also thrives in drier soils and on the Piedmont of northern Delaware.

Summersweet is another name for Sweet Pepperbush. Also, this species is sometimes called Coastal Sweet Pepperbush, to distinguish it from another *Clethra* (*C. acuminata*) that grows in the southern Appalachian Mountains.

Sweet Pepperbush has many superior qualities for gardens. It is easy to grow, and relatively resistant to diseases and pests. Deer do not often browse it. Since it is native to this region, it is adapted for our climate and soils. In fact, it grows best in acidic soils, which occur naturally throughout Delaware. Sweet Pepperbush is quite tolerant of shade.

In addition to its wonderful fragrance and beautiful floral display, Sweet Pepperbush flowers just at a time when gardeners have few

Garden Tales



Submitted photo

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choices for blooming shrubs, especially natives. In the fall, the leaves turn a pleasing yellow.

Another plus for Sweet Pepperbush is the attractiveness of the flowers for insects. Many of the floral visitors, such as honeybees and bumblebees, are important pollinators for crops. The Sweet Pepperbush plants in my yard also attract many hover flies, soldier beetles, and tumbling flower beetles.

In the garden, Sweet Pepperbush grows best in lightly shaded, moist sites. These shrubs are wonderful on edges and in woodland gardens. They will tolerate broader growing conditions, though (deep shade to full sun and very wet to somewhat dry soils). Many cultivars are commercially available, including some pink-flowered ones, giving a broad range of choices to the gardener.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call (302) 857-6450 for more information about this article.

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