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Callicarpa americana

Family: Verbenaceae

Beautyberry; American beautyberry; French mulberry; turkeyberry

Fruit display in the fall of the year

Beautyberry

Synonym: None Found
Origins: Virginia south to Florida; west to Texas; Caribbean; Bermuda; northern Mexico; var. lacteal (or alba) rarely seen
U.S.D.A. Zone: 7a through 12b (0°F Minimum)
Growth Rate: Moderate
Flowering Months: Late spring to summer
Leaf Persistence: Deciduous; evergreen in the warmest of areas
Salt Tolerance: Low
Drought Tolerance: High
Nutritional Requirements: Low
Potential Major Pests: None Known
Typical Dimensions: Height, 6-8 feet; spread, 5-8 feet
Propagation: Seed; cuttings
Human hazards: None known
Uses: Accent; specimen plant; mass planting; background; low maintenance natural gardens; bird and butterfly attractor
Availability: Uncommon in retail nurseries; common in woodlands; limited availability in native plant nurseries

Five-year old shrub in fruit at Collier County Extension Office.

Natural Geographical Distribution and Ecological Function

Callicarpa americana is a shrub native to Florida and the southeastern United States from Virginia to Texas. It can be found growing in hammocks, pinelands, well-drained woodlands and along wooded roadsides. It is also native to Bermuda, northern Mexico and the Caribbean. Both the bright magenta-colored fresh fruit and the black dried fruit are highly favored by birds. Indeed, mockingbirds often establish territories around individual plants and drive off potential competitors. The leaves are eaten by deer. The variety 'lactea' (synonym 'alba') has white fruit and is far less common.

Shrub with fresh fruits, Hickey's Creek, Lee County, late September

Shrub with dried fruits and no leaves, Hickey's Creek, Lee County, late December

Growth Habit, Morphology and Reproduction

Beautyberry is a fast-growing, multi-stemmed deciduous shrub. In natural settings it often grows upright with few branches. In the garden, it is more likely to grow to heights of 6 to 8 feet, with an equal width. It has a rounded, open form with outward-spreading branches, which tend to arch toward the ground on older, larger shrubs. New stems are very pubescent (hairy) and older branches are grayish-brown with notable white lenticels.

The leaves are simple, ovate (egg-shaped), generally 2 ½ to 6 inches long and 2 to 5 inches wide and have an opposite arrangement on the stems. The leaf margins are distinctively serrated from slightly below the middle of the leaf to the acuminate apex (pointed tip). Both surfaces of young leaves are pubescent, but older leaves are pubescent only on the lower surface. Beautyberry leaves are light green in color, with prominent veins and a somewhat coarse texture.

The pale lavender-pink flowers are very small, approximately 1/6" long, and delicate in appearance. Despite their size, the flowers are somewhat showy and are produced on new growth in the leaf axils as short-stalked or sessile (no stalk) densely clustered cymes. The tiny flowers are inconspicuous, all but hidden beneath the broad leaves, and go unnoticed until fruiting begins. Beautyberry generally blooms in spring or late summer, although in southern Lee County, blossoms may appear as late as early November.

The spreading growth habit of Beautyberry is evident in the older branches of this specimen. Newer growth is upright in center.

Beautyberries propagated from soft-wood cuttings are laden with fruits in mid-January. Estero, Florida

An unpruned shrub in medium shade is tall and leggy and remains fruitless in early November. Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, Florida

Leaves are 2 1/2 to 6 inches long, stalked and are broadest below the middle.

The margins are serrated from the tip to slightly below the middle of the leaf.

The acuminate (pointed) leaf apex (tip). The leaves also have prominent veins, as shown here and in the photos above and to the left.

The fruit provides the obvious interest and gives the shrub its common name. It's botanical name, *Callicarpa*, is derived from two Greek words meaning 'beautiful' and 'fruit'. *Americana* means that it was first found in the Americas. The fruits are produced in abundant clusters usually in late summer through fall. The fruit is a 4-stoned, small globose (round) berry-like drupe circling the stems. The bright lavender-pink, magenta, violet, or rarely white, color is a distinguishing feature of Beautyberry. When fresh they make a very showy display and they often persist as dried black fruits after the leaves have dropped in late autumn. Fruits are edible but not very palatable. According to some, they are insipid, and tend to become astringent and dry the mouth a few minutes after being eaten. Others use it as jelly or preserve. Beautyberry is easily propagated by seed or softwood cuttings. The latter produces flowering plants much sooner.

Left: Fruit clusters of White Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana* Var. lactea). This variety is seldom seen in the landscape.

Right: Beautyberry is more commonly seen with purple fruit clusters.

Fresh drupes in early September

Dried drupes cling to a leafless stem in late December

Planting and Maintenance

Beautyberry can be planted year-round in Florida. It is tolerant of most well-drained soils and can also be grown in light, sandy soils. It will grow in heavy or filtered shade, but for the best display of fruit, full sun is recommended. Transplants are relatively easy to root. Watering is required to establish nursery grown plants. Established Beautyberry requires very little irrigation or no irrigation and can withstand periods of drought. The species is not salt tolerant. Beautyberry scarcely branches above its base. Thus, severe pruning, often down to the ground, produces a handsome, bushier and more vigorous plant. Pruning is best done in the fall after fruiting.

Beautyberry is an excellent addition to woodland or naturalized areas and can be massed with other native plants. It is a good companion plant for firebush and wild coffee. It's large, open growth habit makes it ideal for use as a specimen shrub and the colorful fruiting branches can be cut and used in floral arrangements. Beautyberry also attracts wildlife, particularly birds, to the garden and the flowers attract bees. In the garden, it readily spreads by self-sown seeds and is not considerably weedy. It has a relatively short life usually under 10 years.

References

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This publication was reviewed by Peggy Cruz, Lee County Extension; Jenny Evans, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation http://sccf.org/; John Sibley, Lee County Master Gardener and All Native Garden Center, Fort Myers, and Kim Cooprider, Lee County Master Gardener.

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