Clethra alnifolia - Summersweet Clethra, Summersweet, Clethra, or Sweet Pepper Bush (Clethraceae)

*Clethra alnifolia* is known as a summer-flowering shrub that readily naturalizes in the border or makes a good foundation shrub. Summersweet Clethra is excellent for wet sites in partial shade.

**FEATURES**

- **Form**
  - medium-sized ornamental shrub
  - maturing at about 6' tall x 5' wide, forming tight colonies with age (however, the increasingly predominant cultivar 'Hummingbird' is half this size)
  - upright oval growth habit ('Hummingbird' has a spreading mound growth habit)
  - slow growth rate

- **Culture**
  - full sun to full shade
  - best performance occurs in partial sun to partial shade in moist to wet, acidic, fertile, organic soils, but it is rather adaptable to a wide range of conditions, including sunny sites, occasionally dry soils, soils of average fertility, soils of various pH, and winter salt spray
  - cultivars are propagated by rooted cuttings, but the species form may also be propagated by seeds
  - White Alder Family, with no significant diseases or pests
  - often suckers with age to form tight colonies (which is good for naturalized situations)

- **Foliage**
  - medium to dark green, alternate, obovate, serrated, and somewhat late to leaf out
  - autumn color is usually a clear golden-yellow and persists for 2-4 weeks

- **Flowers**
  - white, shell pink, or light pink, blooming anytime from late July to early Sept. and lasting for about 3 weeks when in bloom
  - inflorescences are fragrant, fine-textured, upright, about 4" long x 0.75" wide, and bottlebrush-like in appearance, attracting butterflies, bees and hummingbirds
  - inflorescences occur on the new growth of the current season

- **Fruits**
  - fruiting stalks noticeable, winter persistent, and a good ID feature, but not ornamental

- **Twigs**
  - light brown to tan, ascending as several stems that are sparsely-branched at the base, but having numerous lateral shoots at the very apex of the new growth
  - shrubs become leggy with age, and often die back at the apical stem tips in winter

- **Trunk**
  - not applicable

**USAGE**

- **Function**
  - specimen, foundation, group planting, border, or naturalizing shrub

- **Texture**
  - medium texture in foliage and when bare
  - thick density in foliage and average when bare

- **Assets**
  - fragrant, fine-textured inflorescences occur in mid-summer and attract many butterflies
  - tolerant of permanently moist to continuously wet sites
  - winter salt spray tolerant

- **Liabilities**
  - legginess occurs with age
  - root suckering with advanced age forms small colonies (this can be an asset if naturalization or moderate erosion control is desired)

- **Habitat**
  - Zones 3 to 9
  - Native to the Eastern U.S.

**SELECTIONS**

- **Alternates**
  - summer-flowering shrubs (*Buddleia davidii, Caryopteris x clandonensis, Itea virginica, Hydrangea* species, *Philadelphus* species, etc.)
  - wet site tolerant shrubs (*Cornus* [shrub forms], *Hamamelis vernalis, Itea virginica, Myrica pensylvanica, Salix purpurea*, etc.)
  - flowering shrubs for shady spots (*Calycanthus floridus, Fothergilla gardenii, Hydrangea* species, *Itea virginica, Pieris japonica, Rhododendron* [including Azaleas], etc.)

- **Cultivars – Variants – Related species**
  - *C. alnifolia 'Hummingbird'* - the introduction that has revolutionized this genus, being a truly compact and spreading form that is much less leggy, slowly maturing at 3' x 3', with twice as many inflorescences as the species form, and with the inflorescences much more densely arranged in the smaller canopy
  - *C. alnifolia 'Pink Spire'* - inflorescences that are red-pink in bud, opening as a light pink color and not fading
  - *C. alnifolia 'Rosea'* - inflorescences that are pink in bud, opening as a shell pink color and fading quickly to off-white, becoming less common in commerce