

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 pennsylvanica*, *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