Itea: Summer Flowers and Autumn Color

by Gary L. Koller

The native shrub *Itea virginica* is adaptable to wet and poorly drained as well as drier soils and has a summer flowering period, richly colored autumn foliage, and showy pearl-like seed capsules. Despite its cultural and landscape assets, this plant is grown by few nurserymen and is virtually unknown to the American gardening public.

This strange and alluring plant is grown under common names including tassel-white, Virginia-willow, and Virginia sweetspire. The generic name *Itea* is the Greek word for willow and refers to the resemblance of the shrub's foliage to willow. The specific epithet *virginica* refers to the state of Virginia. Botanically the plant is the subject of some disagreement. Some taxonomists place it within the saxifrage family and others place it with the genus *Choristylis* in the segregate family, Iteaceae.

*Itea virginica* inhabits swamps, land around lakes, and borders of wooded streams. Its natural range spreads from the coastal plain of New Jersey southward to Florida, west to Louisiana and to East Texas, and again northward up the Mississippi valley into Illinois, Missouri, and Oklahoma. The species is native only to North America.

Virginia sweetspire grows six to ten feet tall and spreads an equal...
or greater distance by means of underground stems. A great cluster of thin stems arise from the center of the plant. Twigs are wine-red on the sunny side of the plant and greenish on the shady side and on older branches. The deciduous leaves are simple, alternate, broadly elliptic to oblong, two to four inches long, and finely toothed. Summer color is a dull green.

The plant has two major attributes as an ornamental shrub, its flowering time and its foliage. At the Arnold Arboretum Itea virginica flowers in early July, a time when few trees and shrubs are in bloom and when much of the landscape is a monotonous green. The individual flowers are perfect and five-parted, pure white to pinkish white, and slightly fragrant. Flowers are grouped in nodding terminal racemes or axillary panicles, two to five inches long. The flowers are charming rather than spectacular: the plant needs to be placed in the landscape where it will be conspicuous when it flowers. According to a brief note in the March 7, 1908, issue of The Gardeners’ Chronicle, Itea virginica “is particularly attractive to butterflies, especially the showy members of the genus Vanessa.” The flowers gradually fade and mature into racemes of tan-brown, two-celled capsules. These capsules are extremely ornamental when viewed against the richly colored autumn foliage. The fruits survive after the leaves have fallen and persist into winter. The individual, small seeds are smooth, a lustrous dark brown, and ellipsoid. Dried clusters of seed capsules are eagerly sought out by flower arrangers.

Leaves are the second major landscape attribute of the Virginia sweetspire. In autumn the foliage changes from dull green to rich shades of reddish purple. As the change occurs, the colors blend from orange to vivid reddish purple. The foliage remains colorful for several weeks and so can be viewed both in the full glowing sun and on dull misty days, which enhance leaf color.

Itea virginica is easy to grow. It prefers a moist to wet soil rich in organic matter, but it does not tolerate standing, stagnant water. It will tolerate the drier, more infertile soils that occur in most home landscapes. The acidity of the soil seems to have little effect on the success and vigor of growth but ideally should be pH 5.0 to 7.0.

Exposure to light can vary from full sun to partial shade. However, in a site with full sun there should be adequate soil moisture or supplemental irrigation during periods of drought. Also, while the plant tolerates considerable shade, it will not flower as freely under shady conditions nor will it take on rich autumn tints. Shade will also cause the plant to stretch and become leggy.

Arboretum staff members Richard Weaver and Robert Nicholson have reported that Virginia sweetspire in the wild tends to be lanky and spindly. Maintenance pruning might be employed to keep the plant tight and compact. This can be accomplished by removing annually a portion of the old heavy stems directly at the soil line. This encourages new and vigorous growth.
The pendent racemes of Itea virginica appear in mid-summer. As shown here, the buds closest to the branch open first, and over a period of time the whole cluster comes into bloom. The individual flowers mature into tan-brown capsules. Even after the autumn leaves have fallen, the clusters of capsules remain attractive. Photograph by R. E. Weaver, Jr.
Itea virginica serves well as a specimen plant. It can be grouped or massed on banks where its heavy growth and stoloniferous habit help to hold and stabilize the soil. This plant may be a solution to the landscape problem of a shady site with poorly drained soil.

The Arnold Arboretum propagation staff has found that cuttings will root easily any time of year. Best results were obtained by dipping cuttings for five seconds in a solution of 8,000 ppm. of I.B.A. (indolbutyric acid) in 50% ethanol, inserting the cuttings in a medium of equal parts of peat and perlite, covering them with plastic, and misting. This plant should be a good classroom subject for beginners in propagation since rooting success is almost certain. The recommended method for home or classroom propagation is to take cuttings four to six inches long, dip the base of the cuttings in a rooting hormone, and place the cuttings in the peat and perlite mix, enclosing the pot and cuttings within a large plastic bag. This propagation unit can be placed in a brightly lit but not sunny window — a north window is ideal. Itea virginica also can be propagated by division and seeds.

We are growing an exciting exotic relative of Itea virginica, the Japanese Itea japonica. In 1955 Dr. John Creech, now Director of the National Arboretum, made his first plant collecting expedition to Japan for the United States Department of Agriculture. During this trip he visited the Hot Springs Utilization Station, Beppu, Kyushu, Japan, and collected six plants of an unnamed compact form of Itea japonica. These were assigned the USDA plant introduction number 226131, propagated, and distributed to a number of testing locations, including the Arnold Arboretum. Our plants, accessioned under the Arnold Arboretum number 144-74, were received in 1974. Today they are approximately two and one-half to three feet tall and are vigorous, stoloniferous plants.

At our request, Dr. Creech inspected the plants growing at the National Arboretum as of December 1979. He reports that they are growing well under a high canopy of trees. They are three to four feet tall and form a dense, broad, spreading mass with loose arching branches, reminiscent of Leucothoe. The young leaves are wine-red and persist into late autumn. The branches are greenish in color, probably due to the semi-shady conditions, and thin.

When I first arrived at the Arnold Arboretum, this compact form of Itea was a delightful discovery for me. Observations over subsequent summers confirmed that our plants bear their small white flowers in late June and early July. Our three-plant grouping is at the top of a stone wall in the dwarf plant garden below the Dana Greenhouses. It is growing in dry acid soil in full sun. The foliage is dark green in summer and wine-red to reddish purple for several weeks in the autumn. This group of plants suffered minor stem damage during the winter of 1978-79, but otherwise would appear to be hardy to our low of -6°F that season.
During the fall of 1976, the Arboretum distributed cuttings of our compact *Itea japonica* to Mr. James Cross of Environmentals, a nursery at Cutchogue, on Long Island, New York. He reports that he is growing this plant in containers and that it quickly grows to a full and handsome plant which he feels will have commercial appeal.

Some who know both *Itea virginica* and the compact form of *Itea japonica* feel that the Japanese plant is a better garden plant because of its size and vigor. Since the compact Japanese *Itea* does have a potential in the market, I believe it should receive a cultivar name to identify and distinguish the genotype. Therefore, with Dr. Creech's permission I propose *Itea japonica* 'Beppu' as the name for all plants originating from the National Arboretum's original introduction P.I. 226131. Its distinguishing characteristic is compactness, as compared with the normal species, which grows six to ten feet tall.

*Itea japonica* 'Beppu' should have wide appeal. It can be grown as a specimen plant. More importantly, landscape architects can use it in poorly drained soils, massed under trees, or grouped to stabilize banks and slopes. *Itea japonica* 'Beppu' is also useful for facing down borders and hedges of taller-growing material. It could also serve alone as a low but wide-spreading hedging material.

These two sweetspires are examples of many fine plants growing in arboreta across North America that are virtually unobtainable from commercial nurseries. The Arnold Arboretum has filled this void for many years by publicizing such plants in *Arnoldia* and by distributing little known plants to Friends of the Arnold Arboretum, to gardeners, and to the nursery trade. Therefore, we are pleased to announce that during April 1980 Friends of the Arnold Arboretum will be mailed a rooted cutting of *Itea virginica* for testing. This is our first biennial plant dividend featuring a native American plant. After the danger of frost has passed, these cuttings should be planted outdoors in a location protected against errant feet or misguided lawnmowers. During the fall of 1980, the plants should be well mulched with pine needles, hardwood bark, or wood chips and perhaps given protection from rodents.

All of the cuttings we are distributing were propagated from a plant collected by Mrs. Mary G. Henry, founder of the Henry Foundation for Botanical Research in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania. Mrs. Henry discovered the plant growing near Sharpsburg, Georgia, in November 1954 and selected it for its superior fall color and persistent autumn leaves. We are indebted to Ms. Josephine Henry of the Henry Foundation for sharing with us the original supply of stock cuttings to begin this distribution project.

People who are not members of the Friends of the Arnold Arboretum or who are members and wish to obtain additional plants of *Itea virginica* will find them available by mail order from Wayside Gardens, Hodges, South Carolina 29695 or Woodlanders, 1128 Colleton Avenue, Aiken, South Carolina 29001.
Departing from the usual high quality of illustrations in Curtis's Botanical Magazine, this illustration of *Itea virginica* (50(1823): t. 2409) is inaccurate in showing upright racemes and misleading in showing a trilobed leaf, an uncommon occurrence. Probably taken from a pressed herbarium specimen, this picture fails to depict the complete gracefulness and charm of the flowering plant.
References


