Virginia Sweetspire

Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) is one of the most brilliant shrubs of the fall garden. Native from New Jersey to eastern Texas, it thrives throughout South Carolina. While it thrives in moist soils, it will adapt to even dry conditions if given plenty of water during its first year while becoming established. Virginia sweetspire will grow well in either sun or shade, although it is most attractive where it receives at least 6 hours of sun.

**Height/Spread**
Sweetspire usually grows three to five feet tall, although it may be taller and leggier in moist or shaded areas. Plants have a denser, more attractive habit when grown in sunnier sites. The form is typically arching and spreading. Plants spread readily by suckering, especially in moist sites. Mass plantings are usually more attractive than individual plants.

**Growth Rate**
Sweetspire transplants easily from containers. Growth rate is medium to fast especially in moist soil.

**Ornamental Features**
Small, white, sweetly scented flowers appear on four to six inch long bottle-brush like flower clusters in May or June. Depending on the cultivar, they may be held erect, or drape gracefully over the foliage. When planted in full sun, flowering is abundant and showy. Flowers last for several weeks and are followed by light tan seed heads that persist into fall, providing contrast to the brilliant fall foliage. Plants flower on old wood, so if needed, prune soon after flowering.

The rich green summer leaves of the species change to a mixture of brilliant red, orange and yellow, while cultivars have been selected for a consistent deep wine red or reddish-purple fall color. Fall color changes occur from October to December, with later color on the coast. Peak color is in November. Color is most intense in sun, but bright even in shade. Sweetspire is semi-evergreen, and colored leaves will remain until temperatures fall below 15 to 20 °F.
Landscape Use
Sweetspire is a versatile plant in the landscape. It is an excellent substitute for burning bush where a smaller or more pest resistant plant is needed. Mass plantings can be used as a high ground cover or shrub bank. Because of its suckering habit, sweetspire is useful for erosion control, particularly near streams or moist areas. However, once established, this is a very drought tolerant plant. It will grow well in USDA zones 6 to 9. Virginia sweetspire is considered deer resistant.

Problems
Sweetspire has no significant pests or diseases.

Propagation
Sweetspire can be easily propagated by home gardeners by cuttings, or division. Cuttings need about four weeks to root, and do so readily, with or without rooting hormone treatment. Root in a mix of three parts perlite and one part peat, kept moist, but not wet. Cuttings can be taken from May to September. Divisions of suckers can be done most easily in fall.

Cultivars
There are several named cultivars of Virginia sweetspire, which were selected for improved fall color, form, and size. The most commonly available are:

- ‘Henry’s Garnet’ is by far the most common cultivar, with brilliant reddish-purple fall color. The six-inch long flower clusters drape over glossy dark green summer leaves. Its typical habit is three to four feet tall and four to six feet wide.
- ‘Little Henry’™ (‘Sprich’, PP#10988) is a Proven Winners® selection that grows to only 2 to 3 feet tall and wide with pure white flowers. It has brilliant orange and red fall color. This cultivar makes an excellent high groundcover, and can be a nice addition to the mixed landscape border garden.
- ‘Sarah Eve’ has white flowers with pink pedicels that make the blooms distinctly pale pink. This cultivar will grow to 4 to 6 feet tall and wide.
- ‘Shirley’s Compact’ is indeed a more compact form that grows to 18 inches tall and 3 feet wide. The leaves are smaller (1 inch long) and twisted. The inflorescences of white flowers are smaller than the species. It is listed for USDA zones 6 to 8.
- ‘Merlot’ grows to 3 to 4 feet tall and wide on slightly arching branches. The fall color is wine red and the foliage persists into winter.
- ‘Beppu’ grows to 2 to 3 feet tall. It spreads and suckers rapidly and is well suited for use as a high ground cover and for erosion control. Fall color is deep purple red. Originally it was thought to be a cultivar of Japanese itea (Itea japonica), but most probably is actually Itea virginica, based on plant size, foliar dimensions, and floral characteristics.

Related Species
- Hollyleaf sweetspire (Itea ilicifolia) is a true evergreen, with spiny margined leaves that are bronze when emerging, and maturing to dark glossy green. It grows six to 12 feet tall and 8 to 10 feet wide, with a graceful, upright arching form. Flowers are very showy, on 12 inch long, pendulous, flower clusters in mid summer or early fall. It is best planted in part shade. For USDA zones 7 to 10


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