

Summersweet

Clethra alnifolia, commonly known as summersweet or coastal sweet pepperbush, is a New Jersey native plant. This plant is adaptable to all soil textures (sand, silt, clay). This deciduous shrub prefers moist, acidic and well-drained soil. Once established, it tolerates short periods of drought and flooding, even by brackish water. *Clethra* is a very suitable shrub for Ocean County.

Summersweet grows best in light, dappled shade or with morning sun and afternoon shade, but it will grow in anything from full sun to total shade. Be patient since it is late to leaf out in the spring. Leaves are serrated and medium to dark green in color. The fall color can be a very attractive golden yellow to golden brown.

Spikes of fragrant white bottle-brush flowers vary from 3-6 in. long and bloom for 4-6 weeks during July and August. Flowers form on new growth; prune in late winter to early spring before the plants leaf out. Plants grow to 4-8 ft in height and spread to 4-6 ft with a medium growth rate. The shrubs spread by suckers (growth from the root system) and can form thickets.

Summersweet is highly valuable to native wildlife. The fragrant flowers attract bees and butterflies. The resulting fruits are dark brown seed capsules that resemble peppercorns. These fruits provide food for birds in autumn and winter. *Clethra* is also a host plant for the larva of several moth species.

There are a number of cultivars available that have the same bloom times, characteristics and care as the native species.

- 'Ruby Spice' is a great choice for those who prefer pink rather than white flowers. The flowers are dark rose-pink and hold their color well.
- 'Hummingbird' is another popular cultivar which offers a more compact habit and more flowers than the native species. It typically grows from 2-4 ft tall with a spread of 3-5 ft and has yellow fall color.

This plant has few pest or disease problems and is considered deer resistant as it is rated as seldom severely damaged by the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station (NJAES). It is a highly adaptable shrub with four seasons of garden interest.

It is often hard to find shrubs that flower in the summer, and even better yet, shrubs that flower well in the shade, but summersweet and its cultivars fit the bill.

Checklist for August

Flower and Vegetable Garden

- ✓ Harvest vegetables regularly to encourage production.
- ✓ Start plants for broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, kale and onions in a half-shaded area for setting out in September.
- ✓ Avoid letting squashes, zucchini, etc., become too large as they will become bitter.
- ✓ Tidy the garden by disposing of any rotten or dropped fruits/foliage to reduce diseases.
- ✓ Trim plants that may become leggy or unkempt such as petunias and verbenas.

Trees and Shrubs

- ✓ Check for gypsy moth egg masses; remove and destroy.
- ✓ Deadhead butterfly bushes and Rose-of-Sharon to prevent seed production.
- ✓ Fertilize roses early in the month for the last time this year. Control fungal diseases with appropriate sprays.

Lawn

- ✓ Ideal turf seeding time is August 20th to October 10th. [See Rutgers Fact Sheet FS584 "Seeding Your Lawn"](#) for more information.
- ✓ Start lawn renovation. See Rutgers Fact Sheet FS108 "Renovating Your Lawn" for additional information.
- ✓ Test soil and amend, if needed.