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## Sweet Spire: *Itea virginica*

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*Itea virginica* (Iteaceae) is a noteworthy native shrub whose ornamental attributes, cultivation, and propagation are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Itea*, Iteaceae, Florida, native plant, shrub.

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Swamps throughout the eastern United States are home to a small shrub of exceptional attractiveness and utility. Known to science as *Itea virginica*, it bears the rather prosaic common name of Virginia-willow; however, this name, like many common names, has no connection to the plant's actual botanical relationships nor to its actual range. Although its leaves do resemble those of various shrubby willows, and it grows in the same habitat as many willows, it is in its own family (Iteaceae) and is not at all related to willows. As for its range, it occurs throughout much of the eastern United States, including Florida, from the panhandle south to the everglades—it is not limited to Virginia. Further north, it is known by more poetic names that hint at its beauty: sweet spires and tassel white.

In the wild, it is sparsely branched and rather lanky as it reaches for light in its shaded swampy habitat. It is a different plant in a sunny garden situation. Under such conditions, it is more compact, producing numerous branches that become thickly clothed in dark green leaves. In the spring, the plants are transformed as they become covered with spikes of white flowers that shine brightly against the dark foliage. Autumn brings a second transformation as the leaves assume brilliant orange-red hues. Its colorful autumnal attire has brought it much fame; however, in the warmer parts of Florida, only an occasional leaf or two will assume autumn colors.

Sweet spire is simplicity itself to grow. With regard to light, it will flourish under a wide range of conditions varying from deep shade to full sun. Although native to wet

swamps, it grows well in average garden situations even tolerating surprisingly dry sites as long as it is shaded. Propagation is also a simple matter. Plants freely produce root suckers so that, if happy, it will form an expanding clump and these provide a ready means of propagation. Cuttings readily root in a glass of water and provide an additional means of increase.

Because of its many admirable qualities, *Itea virginica* is being promulgated by specialty nurseries catering to the connoisseur market. The form commonly sold by such nurseries is 'Henry's Garnet', a cultivar of compact habit with brilliant red autumn color. Another cultivar, 'Sarah Eve', has recently become available. 'Sarah Eve' is noteworthy in that the flowers are suffused with red pigments, giving them a pink tinge. Even the leaves of this cultivar are suffused with red. The red pigments combine with the green chlorophyll in the leaves to produce a beautiful velvety dark green color that distinguishes 'Sarah Eve' even when it is not in bloom. 'Sarah Eve' was discovered in the wild in Florida by Nancy Bissett, one of the proprietors of The Natives nursery.

A rare, wild form was described by the botanist, M.L. Fernald, as *Itea virginica* forma *abbreviata*. This is a miniature form of extremely compact habit, with flower spikes less than one inch long and leaves that are only slightly longer. This plant sounds charming and would appear to be perfectly suited for growing in containers or in small gardens. Unfortunately, it does not appear to be present in cultivation.

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**NOTE:** This is the author's PDF version of an article published in *The Palmetto*, the journal of the Florida Native Plant Society. The PDF and print versions differ substantially in formatting and pagination, the taxonomy has been updated, and minor corrections to grammar and punctuation have been made. The print version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 1994. Sweet Spire: *Itea virginica*. *The Palmetto* 14(1):12.

This PDF version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 2009. Sweet Spire: *Itea virginica*. Internet: [http://www.rufino-osorio.com/articles/itea\\_virginica.pdf](http://www.rufino-osorio.com/articles/itea_virginica.pdf).

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