

Sweet Spires

Itea virginica

by Rufino Osorio

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. This name, however, like many common names, has no connection to the plant's actual botanical relationships nor to its actual range. Although *Itea*'s leaves do resemble those of various shrubby willows, and it grows in the same habitat as many willows, *Itea* is in the Saxifrage family 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. Farther north, it is known by more poetic names which hint at its beauty: Sweet Spires and Tassel White.

In the wild, *Itea* 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 *Itea* much fame. In the warmer parts of



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Florida, however, only an occasional leaf or two will assume autumn colors.

Itea is simplicity itself to grow. With regard to light, it will flourish under a wide range of conditions from dense shade to full sun. Although native to wet swamps, it grows well in the average garden, even tolerating surprisingly dry sites as long as it is shaded. Propagation is also a simple matter. *Itea* freely produces root suckers so that, if happy, it will form an expanding clump, and these provide a ready means of propagating the plant. Cuttings readily root in a glass of water and provide

an additional means of increase.

Because of its many admirable qualities, *Itea* 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 which distinguishes 'Sarah Eve' even when it is not in bloom. 'Sarah Eve' was discovered in the wild in Florida by FNPS Heartland Chapter member Nancy Bissett, one of the proprietors of The Natives nursery.

A rare, wild form of *Itea* was described by the botanist, M.L. Fernald, as *I. virginica* forma *abbreviata*. This is a miniature form of extremely compact habit, with flower spikes less than one inch long and leaves which 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.

Rufino Osorio is enthusiastic about neglected native plants that have definite horticultural potential and are easy to grow throughout a wide range of Florida.