Beautyberry, An Under-used Native
by Scott Zona

Want a fast-growing, yet well-behaved, shrub with rich green foliage and attractive flowers in the summer and colorful fruits that are irresistible to birds in the late summer and early fall? Want a shrub that is virtually pest-free, that requires only minimal maintenance, and that is readily available from commercial nurseries? If such a shrub appeals to you, then give our native beautyberry or beautybush, Callicarpa americana L., a try.

Callicarpa americana is only one of about 140 species of Callicarpa native to the tropics and mild temperate zones of both eastern and western hemispheres. To my mind, however, none of the other species of Callicarpa have anything more to offer in terms of horticultural merit than our own native beautyberry. It is a member of the Verbenaceae, the Verbena family, to which lantana (Lantana camara) and golden dewdrop (Duranta repens) also belong.

Beautyberry grows to a height of 1.5 to 2 meters (to 7 feet) if soil is moist and fertile. In less favorable soils, the plants stay smaller. In either case, beautyberry looks best when grown under light, dappled shade, such as that found under pines or tall oaks.

The fruits are the main event for this shrub. They are about 5 millimeters in diameter, borne in tight clusters at the nodes of the stems, but what they lack in size they make up for in sheer number and their bright magenta color. If beautyberry has any faults, it is that the color of the fruits is so vivid that it does not blend with other colors in the garden. Plant callicarpa where you can appreciate its eye-popping fruits on their own terms.

The name Callicarpa is from the Greek and means "beautiful fruit", and although the fruits give beautyberry both its scientific and common names, its delicate pink flowers are no less charming. They cluster about the petioles, bright yellow-tipped stamens dancing above light pink petals. Bees appreciate the flowers, and because beautyberry is self-compatible, meaning a flower polli-
nated with its own pollen will set fruit, even lone shrubs will bear abundant fruit in the late summer and fall.

If you want a shrub to attract birds to your garden, beautyberry is an ideal choice. Birds love beautyberry fruits! Bear in mind, however, that birds are natural seed dispersers, and next spring could bring beautyberry seedlings where none had been before. Volunteer seedlings are not hard to recognize and are easily pulled out or transplanted to desired sites.

Beautyberry is also easily propagated from seed. If you are fortunate enough to live where beautyberry is abundant, you can simply gather some seeds from those individuals with nice form and color. Planted in warm, moist potting mix, the seeds will germinate within three weeks at most, and the plants will flower the second year from seed. For those less patient or without access to wild plants, many nurseries and mail order firms carry beautyberry. Several "improved" cultivars of beautyberry are available in the nursery trade. Most striking, perhaps, is the white-fruited cultivar known as Callicarpa americana 'Lactea'.

The vigilant gardener can gather beautyberry branches for flower arrangements, wreaths, and indoor decorations before the birds remove all the fruits. If the cut branches are placed in a cool, dry place, the fruits dry nicely without falling off, and the long branches can be cut to desired lengths. Any withered leaves that remain attached to the stem should be removed at this time. Alternatively, fresh, still flexible stems can be trained with florist's wire and induced to dry in interesting curves.

In the winter, once the beautyberry has had their fill of fruits, Callicarpa should be pruned heavily. I prune the shrubs back nearly to the ground, so that next spring's growth will bring long, fast-growing, leafy canes that bear clusters of flowers and fruits at the base of nearly every leaf.

Callicarpa makes an attractive addition to the native landscape and one that should be used often. Callicarpa is nothing but good news: it's not endangered, it's not invasive, and it's not difficult to grow. Give callicarpa a try!

Scott Zona is the Palm Biologist for Fairchild Tropical Garden.

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