

Still Swooning Over Sweetshrub by Tom Clark



Sweetshrub blossoms (clockwise from bottom) *Calycanthus floridus*, 'Athens', *C. ×raulstonii* 'Hartlage Wine', *C. floridus*, and *C. 'Venus'*

My fond memories of sweetshrub are nestled alongside memories of catching fireflies and playing kick-the-can on late spring evenings when its sweet and spicy fragrance perfumed the warm still air. The foundation of these memories is the enormous specimen in my parent's yard in western Massachusetts, and even though many showier plants—the botanical drama queens: lilacs, azaleas, crabapples, and rhododendrons—were in blossom at the same time, I developed a special affection for sweetshrub.

Sweetshrub (*Calycanthus floridus*) goes by many names: Carolina allspice, strawberry bush, pineapple bush, sweet bubbly-bush; all refer to the fruity fragrance of the blossoms. The fragrance doesn't end with the flowers: the foliage, stems, and even the dried wood, bark, and seedpods have a spicy, camphor-like scent that in most plants is unexpectedly pleasing.

Hailing from our southeastern woodlands, this colonizing shrub occurs most frequently in rich woodlands and along shaded streams; but this adaptable plant can also be found in the understory of decidedly dry upland woods. The somewhat strag-



The greenish flowers of 'Athens' hide among the leaves but their fragrance gives them away.

gly habit of sweetshrub in its natural setting belies its ability to develop into a first-rate garden shrub. Given a sunny to partly shaded site and reasonably good soil, it will prosper and reward the gardener with a full, vigorous, floriferous specimen essentially free from insect and disease problems. And, though not a bright star in the fall garden, the broad leaves turn a respectable yellow in autumn before dropping to reveal a pleasant rounded architecture.

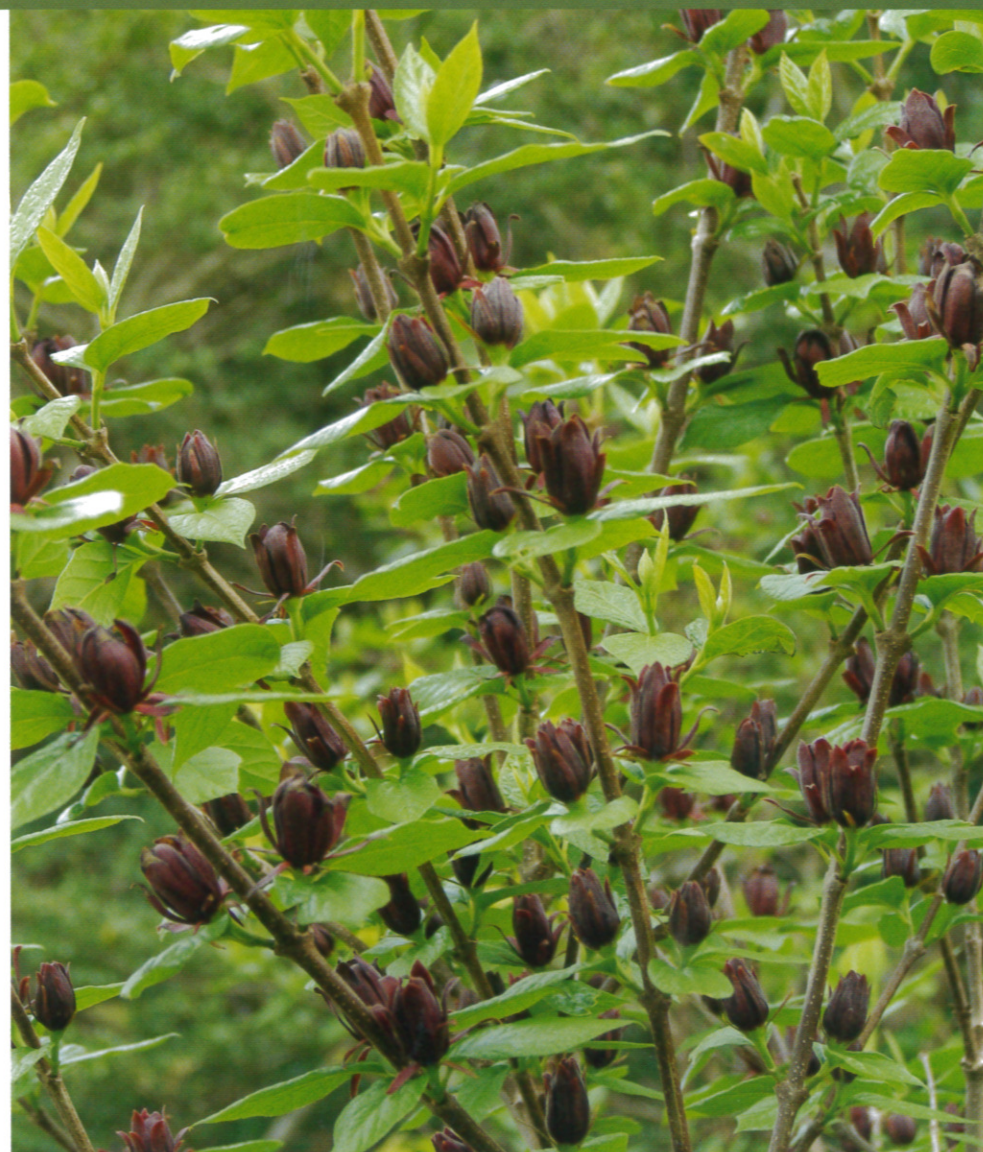
The aromatic inch-wide flowers that produce the memorable waves of fruity fragrance open from mid-May into early June, long after spring's riotous awakening. The unusual flowers can be narrowly upright or round and are composed of rows of straplike tepals that peel away from the center as the flower opens. The blooms are not *exactly* colorful, in fact, they are typically brownish-red or at their best a deep maroon. The fruit, a three-inch dried pod, reminds me of a shriveled and misshapen Bosc pear. I admit they are more unusual



The globose flowers and bullate leaves of 'Michael Lindsey' are unique.

than attractive, however, the large seeds within provide a ready means of propagation: store the seeds in damp sphagnum moss in the refrigerator until March or April, sow, and wait for the vigorous seedlings bearing large, distinctive butterfly-like cotyledons (seedling leaves) to erupt from the pot.

For an old-fashioned favorite (in cultivation since 1726) with a large geographic distribution, there are undoubtedly many fine forms yet to be discovered and



The flowers of sweetshrub make a striking display.

introduced. Recent interest in native plants and appreciation by a wider gardening audience has led to the selection of several choice forms. The typical form and a unique greenish-yellow flowered form named 'Athens' thrive at the Arboretum in Holly Park alongside American hollies, enkianthus, oak-leaf hydrangea, winter-hazels, and rhododendrons. Another fine selection, 'Michael Lindsey', grows in the nursery where each spring it produces flowers of a much richer reddish hue and leaves that are bullate—distinctly puckered and blistered not unlike spinach.

Two other *Calycanthus* species exist in the world, one in California and one in China. Both have figured into recent hybridizing efforts. The recently introduced hybrids 'Venus' and 'Hartlage Wine' are two of the most exciting new plants available to gardeners. Both grow happily at the Arboretum and perhaps one day may form

the foundation of some budding horticulturist's fond memory. For me, when sweetshrub's unmistakable fragrance wafts my way, it triggers a sensory memory instantly refreshing vivid childhood images from when I was first captivated by its subtle charms.