

AMERICAN BITTERSWEET

Celastrus scandens

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American bittersweet is a twining woody vine that grows vertically or sprawls horizontally over bushes and fences. Blooming in spring, the small, green flowers produce yellow fruit which in the fall develop into hanging clusters of yellow-orange fruit which split open to show bright red-orange seed coats. Plants are male or female, and both sexes are needed for fruit set. Pollination is by insects, especially bees, and also by wind. The vine grows in a wide variety of habitats including fencerows, forest edges and roadsides. Preferring rich, evenly moist soil in full sun or light shade, the plant will tolerate abuse, including heat, drought, and even salt.

Unfortunately the native American bittersweet is declining, while the nonnative Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*) is spreading and increasing in abundance. While the nonnative Oriental bittersweet carries fruits in small clusters along the stem, the fruits of the native American bittersweet are twice as large, and grow in profusion at the tips of the stems. The broad oval leaves turn clear yellow in the fall, and then drop, allowing the berries to show to best advantage. This vigorous and robust vine grows 20 feet or more if not pruned.



All parts of the plant are potentially toxic, but the bark extracts were a folk remedy for rheumatism, liver and skin ailments. American Indians used the leaf tea for diarrhea and dysentery.

American bittersweet grows on the Virginia peninsula and in Virginia mountains, ranging south to Florida and Texas. ❖