

## American Beauty

By Susan Camp

Last week I listened in surprise to a voice message from Mary, my new-found friend, who shares my interest in learning more about gardening. She described a shrub growing near her house that a friend had called “beautyberry.” I was stunned, because I had just printed an article from VA Tech on *Callicarpa americana*, American beautyberry. Isn’t there an old saying about great minds thinking alike?

Mary’s timing was perfect. Fall is the season of the year when beautyberry lives up to the meaning of its name. “*Callicarpa*” is Greek for “beautiful fruit.” Following pale lavender flowers, the plump, iridescent, magenta-pink berries, which encircle the stem in tight clusters, appear in late summer to early fall and remain on the stems after the leaves drop. The berries provide food for songbirds, including robins, purple finches, and brown thrashers. Squirrels, raccoons, foxes, and opossums also consume beautyberries.

American beautyberry is native to the southeastern United States and Central America, ranging from USDA Hardiness Zones 7 (possibly 6b) to 11. It is cold and heat tolerant, but may drop leaves and flowers during a prolonged dry spell, like we currently are experiencing. A deciduous, perennial shrub, beautyberry likes light to moderate shade, thriving in woods, bottomlands, or swamp edges. The shrub requires moist, loose, well-drained sandy loam or clay with a pH range of 3.7 to 6.4. In full sun, beautyberry will produce a bumper crop of flowers and berries if the soil is kept moist.

The rounded shrub has a loose, open habit with long, drooping branches. Mature height is generally 4 to 6 feet with a spread of similar size, but under optimal growing conditions, beautyberry can grow 8 to 10 feet tall. The oval leaves are light green, paling to chartreuse in the fall before dropping. Deer will eat beautyberry leaves during the summer.

Beautyberry blooms on new wood, so it should be pruned in late winter or early spring. Remove all dead branches and either thin a slow-growing shrub or cut a fast grower all the way back to within 4 to 12 inches of the ground to maintain size and shape. Beautyberry grown in full sun should be pruned heavily to increase flower and berry production.

Beautyberry makes an attractive hedge or thicket; much like forsythia, it shows best in a massed planting. The shrub also works well at the back of a border or along a fence line. Beautyberry can be grown from summer or fall softwood cuttings or from seed. It will also reseed on its own or by birds and animals. Beautyberry transplants easily from volunteers, although you should never remove native plants from the wild. You can transplant shrubs that pop up in your yard.

Beautyberry has no serious insect pests or diseases, although black mold and leaf spot are mentioned in one article.

Native Americans brewed teas from beautyberry leaves, berries, and roots to combat malaria, dysentery, and colic. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century farmers rubbed the crushed leaves on themselves and their mules to repel mosquitoes. Results of studies by the Agricultural Research Service indicate that *C. americana* contains two chemicals that have repellent properties.

Besides American beautyberry, three species of Asian beautyberry often are available at nurseries: *C. dichotoma* and *C. bodinieri* from China, and *C. japonica*, a Japanese native. The Asian natives may be more cold tolerant than their American cousin, but have the potential to be invasive. All four species have cultivars that produce white berries.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2901-1033 “*Callicarpa americana*”; Clemson University Extension HGIC 1086 “Beautyberry”; USDA NRCS Plant Fact Sheet “American Beautyberry: *Callicarpa americana* L.”; and the Missouri Botanical Garden article “*Callicarpa americana*” offer information on this unusual, attractive, hardy shrub.

If you don't have a beautyberry bush, I recommend planting one. You won't be disappointed when the psychedelic purple berries appear. I hope both Mary and I have the opportunity to watch the birds enjoying the pretty berries as a winter treat.

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