

# SWEETSHRUB (*CALYCANTHUS*)

John Frett

SWEETSHRUBS ARE MEDIUM-SIZED SHRUBS that grow under the forest canopy. Our Eastern Sweetshrub, also known as Carolina Allspice, commonly grows in full shade but is open in habit and flowers less in that environment. Plants growing in full sun in northern gardens are much denser and more floriferous. Since full sun often results in dry soil, an intermediate environment that maximizes light but avoids excessively dry soils is ideal for these plants. Practically speaking, these are easily grown plants that are consistent performers in the garden. For the most part, sweetshrubs are pest free and easy to grow. Plants will sucker in time and spread limitedly. Older plants may become somewhat leggy and are easily rejuvenated by pruning back to ground level. The foliage is typically dark green with some selections excelling as evidenced by the luster of their foliage.

Leaves typically turn a clear yellow in fall, enhancing the plant's appeal.

*Calycanthus* is a small genus of only four species by current taxonomic definition, but this was not always the case. Sweetshrub is native to North America with one exception, and this exception has provoked much taxonomic debate. Formerly known as *Sinocalycanthus chinensis* (and still listed as such in many catalogs), it differs not only in its origin but in the appearance of the flower.

Chinese Sweetshrub, as it is commonly known, has a white flower with broad petals and small, waxy yellow petals in the center of the flower. The flower is larger than the North American species but lacks fragrance typical of our natives. This floral difference argues for a unique genus but a hybrid between the Chinese and Eastern native species was identified (*Calycanthus* × *raulstonii* 'Hartlage Wine'). Since this was a cross between two different genera, the hybrid was initially given the combined generic name *Sinocalycanthus* × *raulstonii* (honoring the renowned

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*Calycanthus* × *raulstonii*  
'Hartlage Wine' at UDBG's  
Herbaceous Garden  
Photo: Rick Darke



late plantsman Dr. J.C. Raulston at the JC Raulston Arboretum at North Carolina State University). Additional taxonomic research suggested that the Chinese Sweetshrub is not sufficiently different from our native species to warrant a distinct genus. Thus all of the sweetshrubs are now in the single genus *Calycanthus*. Additional hybrids exist but do not necessarily fall into the hybrid species since they vary in parentage (see descriptions on next page). You will see all of these names in nursery catalogs. Regardless of the taxonomic conundrum, these plants offer great utility and beauty to gardens.

As mentioned above, Chinese Sweetshrub has a large (2.5–3 inch diameter) flower, white tinged pink, with a yellow center. The fewer petals are much wider adding to the flower's showiness. Our native species have brown maroon (east coast) or red maroon (west coast) flowers that are 1–1.5 inch diameter with numerous narrow petals, with a fruity fragrance that can be very aromatic but varies significantly from plant to plant. The flower color does not contrast well against the rich green foliage, and if not for the fragrance, could often be overlooked. The hybrids offer intermediate flowers that greatly improve the visual display. Hybrid flowers are larger with broader petals, and range in color from white to red-maroon and vary from no fragrance to mild fragrance. All plants produce a 3–4 inch long, dark brown dry fruit that contains many seeds. The fruit has minimal display value and is only occasionally eaten by wildlife.



*Calycanthus floridus*  
'Michael Lindsey' fruit  
Photo: Rick Darke



*Calycanthus chinensis*  
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer



*Calycanthus* 'Venus' at UDBG's Herbaceous Garden  
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer

Latin Name	Common Name	Mature Size	Light	Soil	Pot Size, Plant Size	Price
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### Sweetshrub *Calycanthus*

*Calycanthus (chinensis × occidentalis)* 'Aphrodite'  
Hybrid Sweetshrub 6–12 ○●☁ 3 g, 3–4 \$35  
The newest cultivar on the market, this hybrid boasts large, purple-red, magnolia-like flowers with yellow tips on inner petals. Unlike the other commercial hybrids, this selection has lightly fragrant flowers with a fruity aroma. The fall color is a golden yellow.

*Calycanthus* 'Venus'  
Hybrid Sweetshrub 5–7 ○●☁ 3 g \$35  
A unique plant with a complex parentage: (*Calycanthus chinensis* × *Calycanthus floridus* 'Athens') × (*Calycanthus chinensis* × *Calycanthus occidentalis*). All this results in clean white flowers about 2 inches in diameter with a hint of maroon in the center; the only white flowered hybrid. Magnolia-like flowers have a fruity aroma of melons and strawberries.

*Calycanthus × raulstonii* 'Hartlage Wine'  
Hybrid Sweetshrub 6–8 ○●☁ 3 g, 2–3 \$35  
The first of the hybrid sweetshrubs, it has stood the test of time. The plant is very popular in the trade for the 2–4 inches wine-red flowers that open in mid-spring, larger than our native but without any fragrance.

*Calycanthus × raulstonii* 'Solar Flare'  
Hybrid Sweetshrub 6–9 ○●☁ 1 qt, <1 \$25  
So new it is not yet available in the trade! From famed magnolia breeder Dennis Ledvina with the same parentage as 'Hartlage Wine', this cultivar has fragrance similar to our native sweetshrub. Rich reddish maroon overlapping petals radiate from the bright yellow center of these 2.5 inch diameter flowers in the spring. Fall color a nice yellow. **PATRON EVENING ONLY**



*Calycanthus* 'Solar Flare'  
Photo: Dennis Ledvina

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*Calycanthus chinensis*  
Chinese Sweetshrub 6–10 ○●☁ 3 g, 3–4 \$35  
Unlike any of the other sweetshrubs, this species offers the largest flowers (2–3 inches) but lacks fragrance. White flowers, tinged pink, have a pale yellow, waxy "cup" in the center. Flowers contrast nicely with glossy green, rounded foliage to provide a superb visual display in the landscape. This is a great plant that can serve as a specimen, a backdrop, or element in the shrub border.

*Calycanthus floridus* 'Athens'  
Eastern Sweetshrub 5–9 ○●☁ 3 g, 2–3 \$35  
Promoted by Dr. Michael Dirr (aka 'Katherine' by Dirr), this selection had a long journey from first discovery until its introduction. A superior plant with 1–1.5 inch wide, strap-like light yellow flowers that are possibly the most fragrant of any sweetshrub; plant near walkway to enjoy the fragrance. The light colored flowers contrast well with large, lustrous green foliage to provide a winning visual display in the spring. N

*Calycanthus floridus* 'Big George'  
Eastern Sweetshrub 6–9 ○●☁ 7 g, 3 \$55  
Introduced by Transplant Nursery in Georgia and named for its founder George Beasley, 'Big George' is a dense, rounded plant with dark green foliage displaying dependable clear yellow fall color. The flowers are reddish-brown with a consistent fruity fragrance. N

*Calycanthus floridus* 'Edith Wilder'  
Eastern Sweetshrub 6–10 ○●☁ 3 g, 2–3 \$35  
This selection is steeped in local history. Quite possibly collected by Mrs. Arthur Hoyt Scott around 1919 and then grown in Mrs. Gertrude Wister's garden at Swarthmore College where it was propagated and introduced into the trade. This cultivar produces reddish-brown flowers, exquisitely fragrant, and unsurpassed by any other dark flowered form. N

*Calycanthus floridus* 'Michael Lindsey'  
Eastern Sweetshrub 6–10 ○●☁ 3 g, 3 \$35  
Selected and introduced by Alan Bush, of then Holbrook Farm, and named for a staff member's new born son. The foliage is the glossiest of the native sweetshrubs and plants are vigorous. The 1–1.5 inch reddish brown flowers are extremely fragrant. Excellent clear yellow fall color. N

*Calycanthus floridus* 'Purpureus'  
Eastern Sweetshrub 6–9 ○●☁ 3 g, 3 \$45  
This plant is a taxonomic quandary, often listed as a botanical variety in nursery catalogs. It does come true to type from seed, indicative of a variety, but is absent from the taxonomic literature. Michael Dirr lists it as a cultivar, as it is listed here. Dark maroon flowers with a slight fragrance, appear in the spring. Plants always display beautiful purple coloration on the new growth that persists on the back side of the foliage, often through the summer. Very rare in the trade. N

*Calycanthus occidentalis*  
Western Sweetshrub 6–12 ○●☁ 1 g, 1–2 \$20  
Very closely related to the Eastern Sweetshrub, this plant is native to central and northern California. Reputedly less hardy, but plants in the UDBG sited in exposed conditions, have never shown winter injury. Flowers have more linear petals displaying a truer red color. Flowers are produced in spring, sporadically through summer, and are 1–2 inches in diameter.



Purple undersides on  
*Calycanthus floridus* 'Purpureus'  
Photo: Melinda Zoehrer



*Calycanthus floridus*  
'Michael Lindsey'  
fall color  
Photo: Rick Darke



*Calycanthus floridus* 'Michael Lindsey' glossy foliage  
Photo: Rick Darke



*Calycanthus floridus* 'Athens'  
Photo: Rick Darke



*Calycanthus floridus* 'Edith Wilder'  
Photo: Rick Darke

### QUICK REFERENCE FOR CULTURAL SYMBOLS

All plant heights listed in catalog are in feet. No inches are used.

In order to help you select the right plant for your gardening needs, we have included the symbols below to indicate plant needs. These are broad guidelines, as plants can often withstand a wider range of conditions. Plants that prefer part shade may grow well in full sun if there is adequate soil moisture during hot, dry spells. Similarly, plants that prefer moist soils may grow well in drier sites if some shade is provided, especially midday.

#### Light Recommendations

- full sun
- partial sun
- full shade

#### Soil Moisture Recommendations

- ☪ dry soil
- ☪ moist soil
- ☪ wet soil

#### Attract Birds, Butterflies and Caterpillars

- ☪ birds
- ☪ butterflies and caterpillars

#### Native

"N" after the plant description indicates plants are native to the Eastern U.S. We consider cultivars of native plants to be native, regarding them as selections from variants in the population.

☪ = Lepidoptera use plant as Larval (caterpillar) food source

☪ = Birds utilize plant as food source & nest building material

☪ = People consume plant fruit or leaves