

Itea virginica L.
SAXIFRAGACEAE

Virginia sweetspire

Synonyms: None

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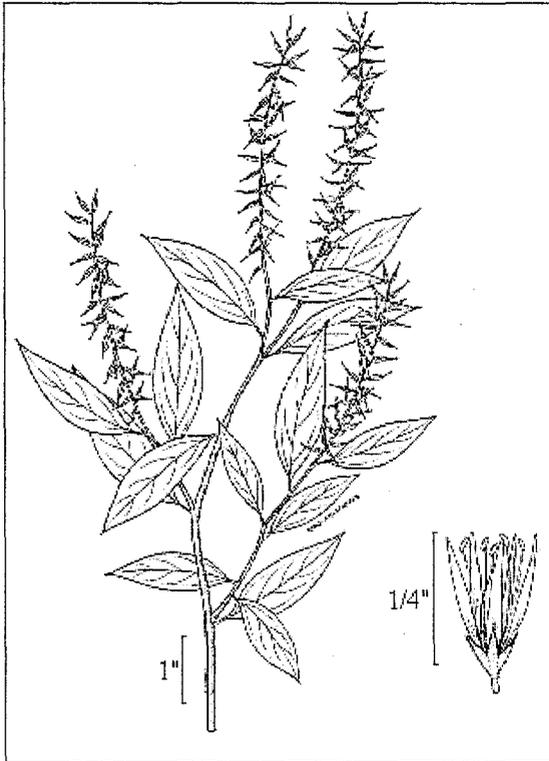


Illustration source: U.S. Department of Agriculture [No date]

General Description.—Virginia sweetspire, also known as sweetspire, tassel-white, Virginia tea, or Virginia willow, is an upright, multistemmed, deciduous or semievergreen shrub with arching branches (Bailey and Bailey 1976, Krüssmann 1984, Odenwald and others 1996). The branches are light green or brown, pubescent when young, while old stems are glabrous, gray and striated. Twigs are slender and may be red when young (Krüssmann 1984) or in the fall (Seiler and Peterson 2001). The medium to dark green, simple, alternate leaves are elliptic to oblong in shape, glabrous above and finely pubescent beneath, four to 10 cm long, and have finely toothed margins. The plants are noted for their racemes of white flowers in early summer and their brilliant red to reddish purple foliage in autumn. Leaves can remain on the plant in a mild winter or in the more southern hardiness zones. Virginia sweetspire can occasionally attain the

form of a small tree but is generally multistemmed and reaches a height between 0.9 and 2.4 m. This species has also been placed in the Grossulariaceae and Iteaceae (USDA-ARS-GRIN 2001, USDA-NRCS 2001).

Range.—Virginia sweetspire is found throughout the Southeastern United States, from the Atlantic to eastern Texas and Oklahoma, although it is uncommon in the latter state (Johnson and Hoagland 1999). It can be found in wetlands as far north as Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey and as far south as Florida. It is also found in southern Illinois and throughout the Mississippi River Valley.

Ecology.—Virginia sweetspire grows primarily in wet areas, in swamps, along stream beds and lake edges, and in floodplains where it can form thickets. However, it can thrive in a variety of soil types and pHs and also shows tolerance to droughty conditions (Bailey and Bailey 1976, Odenwald and others 1996, Ohio State University 2002). The species is tolerant of various light regimes and will grow well in both the sun and the shade; however, it can become leggy and sparse in the shade. It flowers more prolifically and has optimal fall coloration when grown in full sun. The species is highly adaptable and tough.

Reproduction.—Virginia sweetspire is named for its drooping to upright 5 to 15 cm-long pubescent, terminal racemes of fragrant, white flowers that occur from early spring to early summer. Individual flowers have five petals and five sepals and are small, only 6 to 9 mm across (Johnson and Hoagland 1999). Flowering period is fairly long, lasting from May to early July (Krüssmann 1984). Brown seeds are produced in small elongate capsules with cranesbill-like projections (The Ohio State University 2002). Capsules can remain on the plant long after leaf fall. Seeds are quick to germinate and reportedly require no pretreatment for germination to occur. Virginia sweetspire can be propagated by rooting cuttings, from seed, or from root suckers (Bailey and Bailey 1976).

Growth and Management.—Virginia sweetspire is semievergreen and fairly long lived. With its long flowering period and attractive fall foliage, the species can do well in landscape plantings. Its adaptability to both sun and shade, and to wet and dry areas, gives it a versatility lacking in some other shrub species. However, it can grow beyond desired boundaries because it spreads by root suckers, and if not pruned it will form thickets. It grows fairly rapidly and easily from basal shoots and is relatively free from insect pests and diseases (The Ohio State University 2002).

Benefits.—The dense thickets of Virginia sweetspire provide cover for wildlife (Silberhorn 1996). Although the dry fruit capsules and small seeds are not a preferred food, they are eaten by birds. The species can be used for erosion control on wet or sloped sites. The fragrant flowers are attractive to butterflies.

References

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