Calycanthus floridus L.  
(Butneria floridus, Butneria floridus)  

Sweetshrub


Family: Calycanthaceae.

Cold Hardiness: This species can be grown effectively from USDA hardiness zones 4 to 9.

Foliage: Opposite, deciduous, simple, (2") 3" to 5" (6") long by 2" to 3" wide leaves are ovate, elliptic, to obovate; margins are entire, venation pinnate, tips acute, and bases acute to nearly rounded; veins are a lighter green to yellow-green than the medium to dark green blades; leaves are slightly rugose, often lustrous, and mostly glabrous to sparsely hair above, while veins are raised beneath with varying degrees of clear to white tomentose pubescence; leaves are tardily deciduous and can be a good yellow in some years; petioles stout, ½" to ¾" long, pubescent and green or flushed red; foliage is aromatic if bruised.

Flower: Fat ovate flower buds open in late spring with numerous petals resemble opening rose buds, then petals reflex to form a broadly cup-shaped 1" to 2" diameter flower; the ovate to lanceolate petals have short hairs on both surfaces; petal colors vary from a purplish pink to dark maroon or rust red-brown; flowers vary from lightly to heavily fragrant, so it is best to purchase in flower to ensure the desired color and fragrance, or purchase a cultivar of known qualities; fragrances are likened to that of a mixture of ripe strawberries, bananas, or pineapples; flowers are axillary or on short branchlets; peduncles are stout and about 1" to 1½" in length.

Fruit: The fibrous capsules turn progressively from yellow-green to light brown to black-brown, are 1½" to 2" long, and resemble an inverted urn with fluted sides; notable, but not ornamental; capsules contain several to many almond-shaped, chestnut brown, hard seeds with a raised suture line and dusting of clear to whitish pubescence; they resemble little beetles.

Stem / Bark: Stems — stems are green turning a rich brown, or flushed red, lightly ridged beneath the buds, flattened at the nodes, and initially pubescent becoming less so at maturity; spicy scented if scratched; the pith is white and six-sided; Buds — Trelease (1931) describes them as superposed in a bud-like aggregate; buds are partially encased by the petiole, with the subsequent leaf scar partially encircling the bud with three vascular bundle traces; buds rounded to ovoid, brown, more or less pubescent; Bark — smooth brown with lighter lenticels becoming gray-brown with age.

Habit: Individually this species is a dense suckering shrub of irregularly rounded proportions growing 6’ to 8’ tall, but plants may sucker to form colonies of larger spread over time; the overall habit is medium to medium-coarse; frankly they can look a bit unkempt if not tidied up annually; in a naturalized woodland setting they become taller (10’), more open, and rambling.

Cultural Requirements: Sweetshrub can be grown in a variety of soil types as long as they are well drained, but grows best in a rich acidic to neutral soil; given irrigation plants can be grown in full sun to partial shade; Sweetshrub is not tolerant of salinity in soils or irrigation water; growth rates are moderate during establishment but can be rapid from suckers; bloom is primarily on old wood, so pruning should be done immediately after flowering to avoid removing flower buds; occasional bloom is also reported on new wood.

Pathological Problems: Few pathological problems, other than root rots on wet soils, are reported.

Ornamental Assets: Plants offer fragrant attractive flowers and are seldom bothered by deer.

Limitations & Liabilities: Best grown in eastern portions of our region where moisture is more regular, soils more acidic, and salts less prevalent; plant parts can be poisonous if consumed in large quantities, the principal toxin is calycanthin.

Landscape Utilization: Probably best reserved for informal shrub borders and naturalizing; nice along woodland edges and paths where the seasonal flowers and fragrance can be enjoyed while ignoring the shrub when not in flower; plants are sometimes shorn to smaller sizes in foundation plantings so that the sweet fragrance can be enjoyed from open windows, walks, or outdoor entertainment areas; occasionally shrubs are grown in cut flower gardens.

Other Comments: People seem to become enamored of the flowers and fragrance, but its limitations in
form and habitat leave it wanting at most times; the genus name derives from the Greek names for calyx (kalyx) and flower (anthos), while the specific epithet means of Florida, in reference to its Southeastern USA origins.

**Native Habitat:** *Calycanthus floridus* is endemic to the Southeastern USA from southern Ohio and Pennsylvania to Florida, and west to Mississippi.

**Related Taxa:** The genus *Calycanthus* L. (*Butneria*, *Sinocalycalycanthus*, *Sinocalycanthus*) contains as few as two to several species in the genus, depending upon the authority followed; several cultivars have entered the trade in the past few years; ‘Athens’ offers pale yellow-green flowers that are highly fragrant; ‘Michael Lindsey’ offers fragrant, dark flowers, compact form, and more reliable yellow fall color; see Dirr (2009) for an extended discussion of cultivars.

*Calycanthus × raulstonii* (F.T. Lasseigne & P.R. Fantz) F.T. Lasseigne & P.R. Fantz  
**Raulston’s Allspice**  

* Calycanthus × raulstonii* (F.T. Lasseigne & P.R. Fantz) F.T. Lasseigne & P.R. Fantz

- Also known as Calycanthus, this was a reputed intergeneric hybrid, later determined to be an intrageneric hybrid, between the American native *Calycanthus floridus* and the Asian species *Calycanthus chinensis* (W.C. Cheng & S.Y. Chang) W.C. Cheng & S.Y. Chang ex P.T. Li (*Chinese Wax Shrub, Sinocalycanthus chinensis*) first introduced by researchers at the North Carolina State University from Dr. Tom Ranney's program; watch for additional introductions from his efforts.
- Mostly known in the trade from ‘Hartlage Wine’ which offers showy larger, sterile, wine red flowers with wider petals compared to those of *C. floridus*, dark green large leaved foliage, and is mildly fragrant; it matures as a large deciduous shrub and is hardy in USDA hardiness zones 6 (5) to 9; the specific epithet honors the late Dr. J.C. Raulston who founded the North Carolina State University Arboretum, now known as the J.C. Raulston Arboretum.

**References:** Core and Ammons, 1973; Dirr, 2009; Grimm, 1993; Lasseigne et al., 2001; Trelease, 1931; Wyman, 1969.

Copyright 2017 by Michael A. Arnold with all rights reserved; intended for future inclusion in *Landscape Plants For Texas And Environs, Fourth Edition.*