

## *Celastrus scandens* L.

## American Bittersweet

**Other Common Names:** Climbing Bittersweet, Climbing Orangeroot, False Bittersweet, Fever-Twig, Gnome's Gold, Jacob's Ladder, Roxbury-Waxwork, Shrubby Bittersweet, Staff Vine, Waxwork.

**Family:** Celastraceae.

**Cold Hardiness:** *Celastrus scandens* is hardy in USDA cold hardiness zones 4 (3b) to 8.

**Foliage:** Deciduous alternate simple ovate-elliptic leaves are 2" to 4" long by 1" to 2" wide with pinnate veins which are slightly raised beneath; margins are almost entire or have tiny nearly crenate serrations with an acute to shallowly acuminate tip, rarely nearly mucronate; bases are rounded to broadly acute; upper surfaces of the glabrous blades are medium to dark green, with lower surfaces slightly paler; yellow fall color develops in some years; the tiny slender stipules are very ephemeral; petioles are  $\frac{3}{4}$ " to 1" long.

**Flower:** Polygamo-dioecious to dioecious flowers are borne in small 2" to 4" long terminal cymes or racemes in spring; flowers are inconsequential aside from the resulting fruit; the tiny flowers are creamy to yellowish green and not ornamental.

**Fruit:** On females, clusters of three-valved leathery to semi-woody yellow-green capsules open to expose  $\frac{3}{8}$ " diameter bright red-orange, orange, to yellow-orange globose arils in late summer to fall which contain small brown kidney bean-shaped seeds; these are persistent and ornamental, but reported to be **poisonous**.

**Stem / Bark:** Stems — twigs are slender, twining, initially green with light tan to off-white vertical lenticels, maturing as gray to gray-brown shallowly ribbed stems with tiny brown lenticels; the pith is solid white; Buds — the glabrous, six to eight scaled sessile buds are tiny, divergent, brown, about  $\frac{1}{16}$ " long, and imbricate; Bark — older trunks are wrapped tightly around their support.

**Habit:** American Bittersweet is a stoloniferous woody scrambling or twining climbing vine reaching heights of 20' or greater; the texture is medium in summer, somewhat coarser in winter.

**Cultural Requirements:** Best fruiting is in full sun, but plants will tolerate considerable shade; vines will grow in most neutral to acidic soils, but will require regular pruning unless grown in locations where they can be allowed to ramble about; fruit production is better in northern areas than the Deep South.

**Pathological Problems:** Few problems are reported on this species, however it is sometimes susceptible to the same pests as *Euonymus* spp.

**Ornamental Assets:** The only real ornamental asset is the bright orange-red fruit.

**Limitations & Liabilities:** Under favorable conditions, *C. scandens* can overwhelm small trees and shrubs; fruit are reportedly **poisonous**.

**Landscape Utilization:** American Bittersweet is best grown on an out of the way fence, arbor or trash pile where it can be allowed to ramble unnoticed until autumn when the fruit can be used for decoration or enjoyed along a nature trail.

**Other Comments:** As children, each fall we would collect the fruit of this species from an old barbed wire fence in the pasture behind our home and along with oak, sassafras, and maple leaves we made autumn displays for the hall table; American Bittersweet offers the attractive fruit sans the potential for invasiveness associated with *C. orbiculatus*; the genus name derives from the ancient Greek name for similar plants, *kelastrus*, and the specific epithet means climbing.

**Native Habitat:** *Celastrus scandens* has a wide native range extending from Eastern to Western Canada and south to Texas, Georgia, and the Carolinas.

**Related Taxa:** The genus *Celastrus* L. contains 20 to 35 species of vines and shrubs, but only *C. scandens* and *C. orbiculatus* are cultivated in American gardens; variegated cultivars are reported.

***Celastrus orbiculatus*** Thunberg.  
(*Celastrus articulatus*)

## Oriental Bittersweet

- Also known as Japanese Bittersweet, *C. orbiculatus* is about as commonly encountered in much of the Eastern USA as *C. scandens* due to *C. orbiculatus* tendency to aggressively seed outside of cultivated landscapes under suitable conditions; for this reason it has been included on some invasive species lists; it is also bit less cold hardy than *C. scandens*, being hardy in USDA cold hardiness zones 5 to 8.
- Oriental Bittersweet is a larger more aggressive vine than American Bittersweet, and *C. orbiculatus* has axillary rather than terminal blooms; the fruit are similar to *C. orbiculatus* and the fall color can be a good yellow.

**References:** Dirr, 1998; Flint, 1983; Vines, 1960.

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