

Notable Natives

Serviceberry

Amelanchier arborea or serviceberry is a deciduous shrub in the rose family (*Rosaceae*). It can play a significant role in the Midwest native garden. There are closely related native species *A.*

interior and *A. laevis*, usually from sandier habitats. A tall and narrow woodland plant, it is one of the first shrubs to flower in spring and is a great plant for residential properties.

Serviceberry likes full sun but will tolerate partial sun or light shade. It requires good drainage but should be kept moist during summer droughts. It transplants easily and is a hardy shrub overall. It adapts to a variety of soil types and rarely requires pruning, so it is very low maintenance! It can be susceptible to leaf rot, powdery mildew and other pests that affect the rose family, but consistent moisture usually prevents insect pests from taking hold. These pests and diseases do not damage the tree significantly.

Planted in clusters, serviceberries work well as border or privacy screens to replace unwanted invasives shrubs such as buckthorn. Besides that, they are beautiful.

Other common names associated with this species include downy serviceberry, sarvis tree, shadblow and juneberry. These sturdy bushes have an interesting history, too. The use of the word “service” in the name may refer to the plant’s flowering around the time of the Easter church service. (Another source says that it got its name for blooming when the deceased could be buried in spring as the ground thawed, and a funeral service ensued!)



Serviceberries. Photo by Carol Rice.

The plant has been of “service” with its hard, heavy wood being used to make wooden-handled tools in the past and for being a



Serviceberries in bloom. Photo by Carol Rice.

source of food for wildlife and humans. Over time serviceberry has come to signal a happy sign of spring in the garden.

Serviceberry is a tall shrub or small tree reaching from fifteen to twenty-five feet tall. The young elliptical leaves are medium to dark green in color and are interesting because they have soft almost woolly “fur” or hairs on their undersides which eventually disappear when the leaves mature. The leaves turn a beautiful reddish to pink hue in autumn. The smooth, grey bark can have a reddish cast, and as the plant matures, the bark grows interesting ridges and shallow furrows. Its slender buds and white flowers grow in drooping racemes or bunches of six to fourteen flowers appearing in spring before mature leaves are present.

The ornamental flowers last only a week or two and are mildly fragrant. After blooming, the flowers develop into small reddish-purple pomes, small apple-shaped fruits that hang in small clusters. The fruit is similar in size to blueberries and ripens over the summer. It is a favorite of native birds and has a history of being enjoyed by Native Americans. It is even harvested by folks today. While some find the berries dry and not very flavorful, others feel they surpass blueberries as fine fruit. They can be eaten raw off the shrub or canned. *Mother Earth News* suggests harvesting serviceberries, encouraging folks to “Bake them into pies, puddings or muffins. Dehydrate them like raisins. Make serviceberry jam or serviceberry ice cream.”



Serviceberries for breakfast. Photo by Sarah Tucker.

Most important of all, serviceberries actively support our wildlife. Native bees pollinate the flowers while other insects and a variety of caterpillars feed on its leaves, thus supporting the population of native butterflies and moths. The fruit is an attractive source of food for many native birds including the hairy woodpecker, hermit thrush, cedar waxwing and Baltimore oriole. With little to no maintenance, these workhorse shrubs provide privacy, beauty, and wildlife support, all the while heralding the start of spring.

— Sandra Alguire