

SHOW-ME LIFESTYLE

Downy serviceberry's spring show

By BARBARA FAIRCHILD

ARE your winter-weary eyes ready for a refreshing sight? If the answer is yes, it's time to look for downy serviceberry. In the wild, it typically is found on forest edges and rocky ridges or in open woodlands. It lights up the area with an explosion of white blossoms in late March and early April.

Downy serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*) is among the earliest of Missouri woody plants to bloom, unfurling its petals some two weeks before native dogwoods. You may find it as a small tree or a tall shrub. Plants with a single trunk can reach as high as 30 feet, but 20 to 25 feet is more typical. Root suckers are common and result in a shrubby growth pattern.

While downy serviceberry adds beauty and charm to a landscape, its greater value is the food and shelter it provides for wildlife. Its spring blossoms provide nectar for butterflies and bees, and its bright-green leaves are a larval food source for several butterfly species. As many as 40 species of birds — including mockingbirds, cardinals, cedar waxwings, towhees and Baltimore orioles — eat the serviceberry's fruit. Mammals that either eat the fruit or browse the twigs and foliage include squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, mice,

Key Points

- Downy serviceberry unfurls its white blossoms in early spring.
- The woody plant provides food and shelter for wildlife.
- Versatile native species' presentation changes throughout the year.

voles, foxes and even black bears.

Downy serviceberry is widespread throughout the eastern United States, with its southern range beginning at the northern tip of the Florida Panhandle and extending northward to south-eastern Canada. Missouri, where it is found statewide except in Bootheel counties and a few counties in the northwest corner, forms the western edge of its range.

Namesake

This far-flung range of locations may explain the downy serviceberry's numerous common names, which include sarvis-berry, shadblow, shadbush, june-berry, sugarplum and Indian cherry. Some are easily explained. Shadblow and shadbush, heard along the Atlantic Coast, reference the fact that downy serviceberry is blooming during the spawning run of shad.

The origin of juneberry seems obvious: June is when the berries ripen and are gathered for eating.



FLOWERS AND FOOD: Downy serviceberry puts on a spectacular springtime presentation while providing food and shelter for wildlife.

The name serviceberry is tied to isolated towns in Appalachia where historically, frozen ground and heavy snow prohibited funerals and church services. When spring temperatures melted the ground and melted the snow, it was time to perform those postponed funeral services and resume church services, and serviceberry blossoms were at hand to lend a touch of beauty.

Sarvis-berry is a term that some say is an Appalachian pronunciation of "service." However, in his book "Shrubs and Woody Vines of Missouri," Don Kurz writes that "sarvis" is a modified form

of "sorbus," the name applied to a fruit known to the Romans.

All-around performer

Whatever the origin of the name, the hardy plant adapts to a variety of soils. It does best when transplanted into well-drained, acidic soil with a pH of 7 or lower. It grows in full sun or partial shade. While serviceberry tolerates occasional wet feet, it prefers good drainage. In a landscape setting, it can serve as a specimen tree and makes an excellent replacement for the overused and not-so-hardy Bradford pear.

While its spectacular springtime show is reason enough to include downy serviceberry in a landscape, savvy landscapers know the plant's performance does not stop there. It continues with the presentation of blueberry-sized, reddish-purple fruit in June, and moves into fall with foliage that ranges from pale orange to gold blended with red and green. Serviceberry concludes the year with its eye-catching, crisscross pattern of dark furrows in the smooth, silvery bark of its trunk and zigzag branching pattern.

Fairchild is the Grow Native! communications specialist. Grow Native! is a joint program of Missouri's Department of Conservation and Department of Agriculture. For information, call 573-522-4115 or visit www.grownative.org.

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