

Cephalanthus occidentalis Buttonbush¹

Edward F. Gilman²

Introduction

Buttonbush has attractive, medium green leaves followed by a late spring flower display unmatched by many plants (Fig. 1). White flowers are borne in a one to one-and-one-half inch diameter globe and fill the canopy when few other plants are in flower. Bright red fruits have formed by late summer to bring the plant back into prominence in the landscape. Most people do not notice the plant until it flowers or displays its fruit.



Figure 1. Buttonbush.

General Information

Scientific name: *Cephalanthus occidentalis*

Pronunciation: seff-uh-LANTH-us ock-sid-en-TAY-liss

Common name(s): buttonbush

Family: *Rubiaceae*

Plant type: shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 4 through 10A (Fig. 2)

Planting month for zone 7: year round
Planting month for zone 8: year round
Planting month for zone 9: year round
Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: native to Florida

Uses: specimen; border; mass planting; attracts butterflies

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant

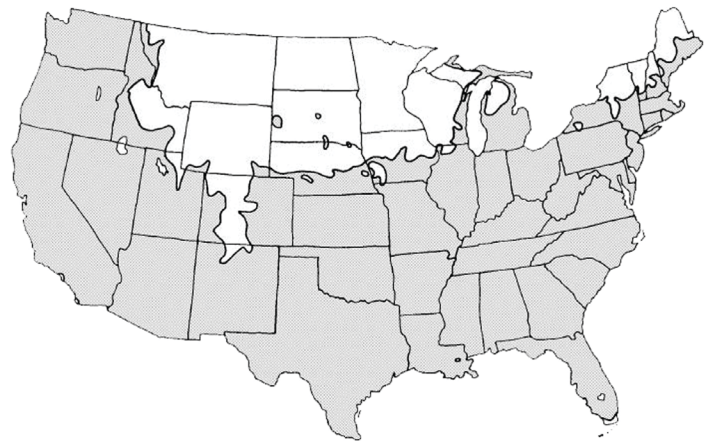


Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 6 to 12 feet

Spread: 6 to 10 feet

Plant habit: round

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: slow

Texture: medium

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Foliage

Leaf arrangement: whorled
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: ovate
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white
Flower characteristic: pleasant fragrance; spring flowering; summer flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch
Fruit cover: dry or hard
Fruit color: red
Fruit characteristic: showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: not particularly showy; typically multi-trunked or clumping stems
Current year stem/twig color: gray/silver
Current year stem/twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun
Soil tolerances: acidic; slightly alkaline; sand; loam; clay
Soil salt tolerances: poor
Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem
Winter interest: no special winter interest
Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding
Invasive potential: not known to be invasive
Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Use and Management

Most specimens of buttonbush are small, reaching no more than about 4 to 6 feet tall. Older plants can reach to 10 feet tall in a moist site and grow to more than 12 feet

wide. Several stems emerge from the ground forming a flat-topped, vase-shaped canopy.

A native shrub best suited for wet sites, buttonbush adapts to landscape sites provided roots are irrigated or kept moist to wet from a nearby stream or pond. Some dieback may occur, especially in the southern part of its range, during moderate or extended drought.

A tea can be made from the inner bark which was used to induce vomiting. Chewing the bark is reported to relieve a toothache.