UF IFAS Extension
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

FPS117

Cephalanthus occidentalis Buttonbush[1]

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Introduction

Buttonbush has attractive, medium green leaves followed by a late spring flower display unmatched by many plants. White flowers are borne in a 1 to 1½ 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. Full Form—*Cephalanthus occidentalis*: Buttonbush
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

Figure 2. Leaf—*Cephalanthus occidentalis*: Buttonbush
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Figure 3. Flower—*Cephalanthus occidentalis*: Buttonbush
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Figure 4. Fruit—*Cephalanthus occidentalis*: Buttonbush
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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 (Figure 5)

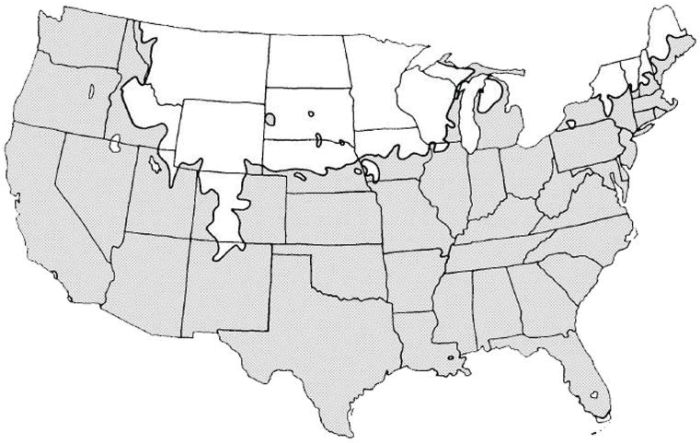

Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting range.
Credits: undefined

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

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: specimen; border; mass planting; attracts butterflies

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

Description

Height: 6 to 12 feet

Spread: 6 to 10 feet

Plant habit: round

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: slow

Texture: medium

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: ½ 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

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.