

Buttonbush, Cephalanthus occidentalis

Buttonbush is a deciduous, multi-stemmed, loose shrub or small tree in the coffee family (*Rubiaceae*). Generally reaching no more than 12 feet in height, the plant is frequently wider than it is tall. It is native to North America from Nova Scotia and Ontario south to Mexico. It is found in the Florida Everglades.

A key characteristic of the Buttonbush is its flower heads which consist of fragrant, tiny, tubular, white flowers compacted into 1-inch diameter spheres. Each flower has a projecting style which gives the flower head a pincushion-like appearance. The long-lasting blooms (June – August) give way to hard, spherical clusters of nutlets that resemble old-time dress buttons; hence its common name. The fruit matures in fall and can stay on the plant through winter, providing interest for the garden and food for wildlife.



The beautiful dark green, glossy foliage is another ornamental feature of Buttonbush. The leaves, which emerge late in spring, are opposite or in whorls of three, ovate in shape, 2-6 inches long, 1-3 inches wide, with a smooth edge and short petiole. The leaves turn yellow-green in the fall.

Other identifying features of Buttonbush are prominent lenticels on coarse stems, absent terminal buds, and pith that is solid and light brown.

Buttonbush occurs as a non-dominant midstory species in mixed riparian forests, pond or stream margins, and swamps. They prefer moist, humusy soils and full to partial sunlight. Buttonbush in the wild is an indicator of an area's wetland status. The plant will tolerate water depths up to three feet and long durations of flooding. It is suitable for wetland restoration and erosion control along water edges.

Buttonbush brings more than its sweet scent, charming blooms and ornamental leaves to a garden.... It is also a magnet for wildlife! More than 50 species of waterfowl and other birds are known to feed on the nutlets. Wood Ducks use the shrub for brood-rearing, and many small birds/animals use the plant for nesting and cover. Deer browse the foliage. The flowers provide ample nectar to hummingbirds, honey bees and other beneficial insects. Butterflies attracted to the plant include Painted Lady, Silver-spotted Skipper, Delaware Skipper, Zabulon Skipper, Hoary Edge, Horace's Duskywing, and Lorquin Admiral.

In the garden, Buttonbush will adapt to a range of soils, except dry ones. The plant suffers no serious insect or disease problems. Prune in early spring to shape, or cut back near to the ground to revitalize. The plant regenerates easily by seed without pretreatment. Collect seeds when the nutlets have turned reddish-brown. Buttonbush can also be propagated by cuttings. Buttonbush is poisonous to humans and livestock.

More information and photos at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/cepocc/all.html>

<http://www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/buttonbush.htm>

http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=CEOC2