

A most charming flowering plant of the wet areas about the countryside, usually seen blooming in the wild and rarely seen in gardens is *Itea virginica*. In late April and early May, it is very conspicuous blooming in its natural habitat. Its pendulous branches, end in spires of many tiny white flowers. Each flower may be 1/16 inch wide and 1/4 inch long, equally spaced all around the stem, like a "bottle brush." These spires are three to five inches long. The bush is usually from three to five feet tall, hardly as wide, but some growing in sunny water's edge may get to six feet. The flower spires are droopy, adding much to the charm of the shrub. It is the only representative of the genus *Itea* in North America. Other species of the *Itea* are found in the tropics of the world and in Asia. Its native range in the United States is restricted to low, poorly drained and wet places, beginning in New Jersey on the Coastal Plain to Florida. The range extends along the Gulf Coastal Plain into Texas, and extends up the Mississippi River valley and its tributaries to the vicinity of Cairo, Illinois. Throughout its range, the shrub and its flowers are surprisingly uniform for a species with such a wide distribution. Of the two cultivars registered, both were named for the autumnal foliage coloring. Most common in the nursery trade is 'Henry's Garnet', a selection made by Mrs. Henry of Philadelphia, from a plant found in the Carolinas. A newer cultivar, grown and named by Mr. Larry Lowman of Wynne, Arkansas, is 'Saturnalia'. He grew it from seed collected along Wolf Bayou in the Memphis area. *Itea japonica* 'Beppu' is a plant some people of authority declare to be a cultivar of *Itea virginica* that went to Japan and returned as a Japanese species. I am just aware of the "discussion." All of this is to relate that appreciation that others have for a very nice native shrub. It is an excellent plant to know in the wild and to grow in one's garden, especially where a wet site is involved. One is not limited to grow *Itea* in a wet place, for it will grow and bloom well in good garden soil, in sun or light shade. It is easily transplanted, grown from cuttings, or grown from seeds. I am unaware of any benefit to birds or other garden wildlife that would enhance its appearance in the garden for those people who plant for wildlife. Nothing in nature is useless or goes to waste. Under garden conditions, this shrub will grow from three feet to five feet tall, almost as broad, and the flowers develop into non-showy seed capsules. It is beautiful in flower, with almost pristine white spires of flowers on pendant terminal limb and twig ends. In the late afternoons, some fragrance can be noted. The foliage is a medium matt green that turns to wonderful fall colors of orange to red to purplish. For those who arrange, the flowers hold up as cut flowers in a vase.

*Itea virginica* is in the Saxifragaceae (Saxifrage Family), along with other garden favorites such as *Heuchera* (alum-root), *Hydrangea* (common and uncommon true hydrangeas). Around its native range, it has several common names. That is a sure sign that this species is admired by ordinary people. Some of those names are Virginia willow (it is not a willow), Virginia spire, sweetspire (there may be other sweet spires) and tassel-flower. I am unaware of any preferences as to soils needing to be acid, sweet or neutral. From casual observations and conclusions made, *Itea* grows well in acid, wet places, even in the muck along the edges of lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams.