

## 2012 August Plant of the Month



**Coastal Sweet Pepperbush, *Clethra alnifolia* L.**

Sweet pepperbush is a member of the pepperbush family, Clethraceae. It has records for the entire state, but is best known in the Pine Barrens of Southern New Jersey. It is a late flower, producing a distinct spicy aroma wafting through the swamps and woodlands that is characteristic of the dog days of summer. Sweet pepperbush can be discovered by sight or smell as the warm days continue into August.

*Clethra* is an unusual shrub. The plant forms horizontal rhizomes and creates dense clusters that are nearly monotypic. It has distinct white racemes that are borne on the ends of branches. It does not form a berry but forms a capsule that is as distinct as the flower. The rounded capsule has a white appearance caused by a white curly hair on the attached sepals. The leaves have a characteristic wedge shape, with its widest part above the middle of the leaf. The reticulate or highly patterned leaf surface is like no other New Jersey shrub. Another interesting fact about sweet pepperbush is the presence of saponin in the leaves. This natural fatty molecule produces a foaming effect that be demonstrated by rubbing vigorously in water. Saponin is a fat once used in soap. It is still recommended today for homemade soaps. Saponin bubbles produce some of the foam seen below dams or in rough water in the Pine Barrens' rivers.

Sweet pepperbush is classified by the US FWS as a wetland species. It has been assigned a FAC or FAW designation, yet it can be found on most soils way outside true wetlands where it forms dense thickets. I once came across such a thicket in Farmingdale Monmouth County. This area was once an oak forest affected by gypsy moths. The moths ate the entire canopy and stripped away the protection of the leaves allowing bright sunshine to reach the understory. This abundance of light allowed the shrubs and vines to grow profusely. The sweet pepperbush intertwined with bull briar became so dense that you were *almost* able to walk on top! I know because I tried! As I hung like a fly in a spider web 4-5' above the ground, I gained a new appreciation of the strength of sweet pepperbush stems.