Alabama's TREASURED Forests
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Plants of Alabama

Buttonbush

(Cephalanthus occidentalis)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Buttonbush is a large shrub or small irregular tree that can reach 25 feet in height, with a stem diameter of 4 inches or more. The native range is very large: from Canada and New England to Florida, Mexico, and Central America. It also occurs in Arizona and California. Buttonbush is found throughout Alabama: in swamps, hardwood bottoms, marshes, and bogs.

The leaves are deciduous, elliptical or ovate, opposite or in whorls of 3 or 4; variable in size, to about 6 inches long, 3 inches wide. The edges are smooth (entire), and the veins are depressed, giving the leaves an attractive quilted appearance. The bark is brownish gray, becoming rough and furrowed on old stems. Twigs are reddish brown.

Photos by Fred Nation

Buttonbush has several common names, and they are descriptive of the distinctive spherical clusters of creamy white, fragrant flowers. Some examples are "honey-balls," "globeflower," and "button willow." The genus name, *"Cephalanthus,"* is also descriptive, from two Greek words which mean "head flower." The handsome flowers are important nectar sources for many bee and butterfly species, and for hummingbirds. The fruits are nutlets that develop in hard, spherical clusters about an inch across. Ducks and other waterfowl feed on the nutlets. Buttonbush is a larval host for the spectacular sphinx moths, which are sometimes mistaken for hummingbirds.

Though it is considered to be poisonous, *Cephalanthus occidentalis* was widely used, apparently with some success during the American Civil War, as a treatment for "the ague," which we know today as malaria. This is not surprising, since a close relative is the South American cinchona tree, the source of quinine, still a standard treatment for malaria. Early American herbalists frequently prescribed buttonbush for a variety of maladies including fevers, toothaches, and dysentery. Other famous family relations include pentas, bluets, gardenias, and, most important of all – a coffee!

Buttonbush is an attractive shrub or small tree, with great wildlife value, but, possibly because it is an obligate wetland species, it is not widely cultivated and is seldom seen in nurseries or plant sales. It is easy to root and grows quickly from stem cuttings, and it can be an interesting addition to stream banks, lakeshores, or wet "problem areas" in the landscape. The summer flowers are very pretty and the birds and butterflies will reward you with their visits!