



Alabama's *TREASURED* Forests
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Beautyberry

(*Callicarpa americana*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

One of our most frequent shrubs in the Southeast, American beautyberry ranges from Maryland to Missouri, west to Texas, south through Florida. It occurs throughout Alabama, mostly on well-drained sites. Since it is so frequently seen across our countrysides, it is viewed or dismissed as a weed. Our familiar beautyberry may, however, deserve another look as an attractive, durable native shrub that not only feeds the birds, it even keeps the bugs away!

Since pioneer times, farmers and stockmen have inserted beautyberry branches beneath the bridles of horses and mules, to keep mosquitoes and ticks away from the animals' faces. For many years *Callicarpa* leaves have been reported, mostly by herbalists, to be an effective insect repellent when rubbed on the skin. Well, here's a newsflash: apparently it really works! United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) researchers have established that four chemicals isolated from *Callicarpa* are effective as insect repellents. According to *Science Daily*, one of them, callicarpinal, has been patented by the USDA's Agricultural Research Service as an arthropod repellent.

What are beautyberry's family relations? This question seems particularly interesting for *Callicarpa americana*, because there is apparently a taxonomic disagreement among some of the experts. To cite just a few examples, the *USDA Plants Database* places it in Verbenaceae, with the verbenas; on the other hand, several university plant atlases, including both Florida and

Alabama, place it in Lamiaceae, the mint family. Who's right? Both families seem anatomically reasonable, but the mint family appears to be the more widespread current view, so for now we will place beautyberry with the mints.

Beautyberry is an open, irregularly shaped woody shrub, to about 8 feet tall, with distinctive bright-green, prominently-veined foliage. The pointed leaves are deciduous, ovate to lance-ovate, sharply dentate, to about 8 inches long, with stellate (star-shaped) hairs beneath. The foliage is frequently foraged by white-tailed deer.

Masses of very small white or pale pink flowers occur in the axils of the opposite, short-stalked leaves in the spring, which develop into distinctive, rounded clusters of small, shiny drupes around the stems. The fruits are conspicuous as they ripen to a bright milky purple color. A white-fruited form is occasionally seen.

Like many familiar plants, *Callicarpa americana* has several common or colloquial names. In addition to beautyberry, it has been called bunchberry, souberry, and French mulberry. This last name is curious, because it is not French and it is not a mulberry. The genus name, *Callicarpa*, is from two Greek words which translate into "beautiful fruit." Unfortunately, they are astringent and do not taste nearly as good as they look, although they have occasionally been made into jelly, preserves, and wine. The fruits, which persist well into cold weather, are important winter forage for many familiar birds, including thrashers, cardinals, mockingbirds, and bobwhite quail. ♪



Photos by Fred Nation

