



BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)

Plant Family: Madder (*Rubiaceae*)

Statewide Wetland
Indicator Status:

- Obligate



Buttonbush is common in partial shade conditions in floodplain forests

Round clusters of one-inch wide flowers with a "starburst" appearance make Buttonbush unique amongst Minnesota shrubs. Most often found in floodplains and other moist habitats with partial shade, the species is useful for storm water projects, shorelines, and buffers in full sun or partial shade. Its height is variable depending on soil and moisture conditions but it can reach up to ten feet tall. It provides excellent pollinator habitat in mid-summer and its seeds are an excellent food source for birds during fall migration.



Round clusters of flowers are attractive to Monarch butterflies in mid-summer

Identification

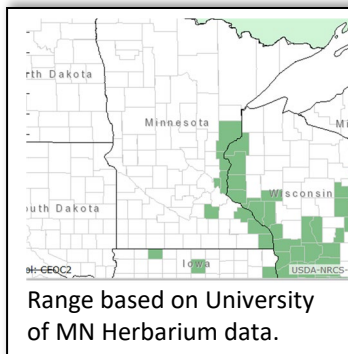
The species can have a variable growth form depending on growing conditions. In moist soils and full sun it tends to have multiple stems, while in drier soils or shade it may have one or just a few stems. The bark is smooth on young stems but rough and reddish brown on older stems. Its leaves are opposite or are found in groupings of three. The leaves are oval in shape but narrow near the base. They lack teeth and have a glossy dark green surface, with a duller, light green underside. The flowers are arranged in spherical shaped seed heads. Individual flowers are tubular, white, have long styles, and are four-parted.



Glossy green leaves that have smooth edges

Range

Across Minnesota buttonbush is most common along the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers where it grows on the edges of open water and in wetlands and floodplains. The species is also found across much of the eastern United State and Canada, as well as California and Arizona. It is often an early colonizing species in plant communities and is most commonly found in floodplains, shrub wetlands, lakeshores, riverbanks, and along ditches. It is occasionally found on limestone bluffs in areas with groundwater seepage. The species tends to become less abundant with increasing shade.



Uses

Being tolerant of inundation and sediment accumulation over its roots, this species is well suited to shoreline stabilization and storm water treatment projects such as the edge of detention ponds. It grows in partial shade where there tends to be less native shrub options. Pollinators with long-tongues that can access the tubular flowers such as honeybees, bumblebees, leaf-cutting bees, long-horned bees, and many butterflies and skippers use the flowers as a pollen and nectar source. The leaves support a wide range of insects including the caterpillars of butterflies and moths, aphids, and beetles that are in-turn are an essential food source for birds. The seeds are eaten by geese and a wide range of duck species. The leaves are considered poisonous to humans and other mammals but they are occasionally grazed by deer. The plant was historically used medicinally as a laxative and for skin conditions.

Planting Recommendations

Buttonbush plants can establish from seeds, cuttings or containerized plants. The seeds should be harvested in the fall after they turn reddish-brown. They don't require special treatment or stratification but are ideally seeded shortly after harvest in the fall. Establishment from cuttings will be most successful when the cuttings are under an inch in width, are inserted into moist soils, and installed in early spring before leaves emerge. Containerized plants can be installed later in the spring or in the fall but will require frequent watering until their roots are well established.

Similar Species



Red-osier dogwood (Cornus sericea) grows in similar locations as buttonbush but has alternate leaves, flat clustered flowers and reddish stems.



Viburnums such as Arrowwood Viburnum (Viburnum dentatum) have opposite leaves like buttonbush but have teeth on the edges of leaves and flat clusters of white flowers.

Primary Uses:

- Stormwater Treatment
- Shoreline Stabilization
- Pollinator Habitat



Buttonbush planted in an urban landscape (Photo by Dave Hanson)

Planting Methods

- Seed
- Cuttings
- Containerized Plants

References

Illinois Wildflowers: <http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/trees/plants/buttonbush.htm>

USDA Plants Database: <http://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=ceoc2>