
Wildflower Spot – December 2016
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

AMERICAN BITTERSWEET

Celastrus scandens

By Helen Hamilton, past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS

Bittersweet is popular for home decorations around the holiday season. Blooming in spring, the small green flowers produce yellow fruit that in the fall develop into hanging clusters of yellow-orange fruit, splitting open to show bright red-orange seed coats. Plants are male or female, and both sexes are needed for fruit set. Pollination is by insects, especially bees, and also by wind.

This twining woody vine grows vertically or sprawls horizontally over bushes and fences, growing in a wide variety of habitats including fencerows, forest edges and roadsides. Preferring rich, evenly moist soil in full sun or light shade, the plant will tolerate abuse, including heat, drought, and even salt. It is native to the Virginia peninsula and mountains and ranges south to Florida and Texas.

Unfortunately, the native American bittersweet is declining, while the nonnative Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*) is spreading and increasing in abundance. While the nonnative Oriental bittersweet carries small fruits in clusters all along the stem, the fruits of the native American Bittersweet are twice as large, and grow in profusion at the tips of the



stems. The broad oval leaves turn clear yellow in the fall, and then drop, allowing the berries to show to best advantage. This is a vigorous and robust vine that will grow to 20 feet or more but can be pruned to a desirable shape.

All parts of the plant are potentially toxic, but the bark extracts were a folk remedy for rheumatism, liver and skin ailments. American Indians used the leaf tea for diarrhea and dysentery. ❖

Photo: American Bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*) taken by Phillip Merrit
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.