

Don't Write Off the Devil's Shoestring

by Marilyn Sallee, December 20, 2010

When you are scanning through lists of plant traits for interesting native plants for a home landscape, you might pass on Indian Currant at first glance. It seems to have all the wrong traits. Flowers are small, green and almost inconspicuous. The little oval-shaped leaves march along, evenly arranged, opposite each other on the stem in a medium dull green color - nothing dramatic. As a small shrub it's too tall for the front of a bed, but too short for a background plant – only 3-4 feet tall. It's not even evergreen.



But when all the other plants are bare and boring, that's when Buckbrush shines. As fall arrives and other plants lose their leaves, this one turns brilliant red. Come the drear monochromatic winter, this native brightens the understory with clusters of pinky-purple fruit all winter long. A mature plant displays a distinctive shredded bark, brownish-purple branches covered in fine hairs and clusters of those raspberry-colored fruit, which are actually drupes, not berries. Cut branches make wonderful displays in the house during winter.

This plant of many common names has talents others lack. Drought tolerance is to be expected in a good native, but this one thrives in full understory shade to sunny edges, in loamy to rocky soil, and dry to moist conditions. It makes a great foundation plant along house or hardscape, but is equally at home tucked under taller shrubs and small trees of a wildscape. It is most common in the Post Oak woods and is an exceptional choice for any woodland garden, or border bed shaded by fence or wall in the yard.

Symphoricarpos orbiculatus is one of fewer than 20 species of *Symphoricarpos*. Almost all are native to North America, with one solitary relative native to China. *S. orbiculatus* originally hails from the Eastern United States and down through Mexico, but is particularly widespread in Oklahoma and Texas.



Coralberry is in the Caprifoliaceae (Honeysuckle) Family, the same family as *Abelia*, *Lonicera*, *Viburnum*, and *Weigela*. It can be twiggy and become a thicket if it's grown in a place it likes. Vigorous pruning in the spring to about knee height every 5-6 years encourages compact growth and new branches. If it gets scraggly, prune it to the ground. You can even mow or weed-whack it. It will rebound fuller than ever in the spring with thick, lush growth and ever more berries next season.

Once established, this dainty little shrub wants to

run – underground, overground, with both rhizomes and stolens. It can send out long runners from the main stem that freely root wherever the node touches soil. You may find these baby plants six to eight feet away, still attached to the motherplant by tough cords – whence it gets the common name of Devil’s Shoestrings. Once well rooted, these plantlets can be cut free and potted up and moved to another location.

While just cutting free the runners is the easiest way to get more coralberry shrubs, other ways of propagating include layering and tip layering, which are similar to what the plant likes to do itself when grown in a good location. Stem cuttings, semi-hardwood and hardwood cuttings and heel cuttings all are also appropriate ways to propagate.

By seed is the most difficult method. Collect the berries in fall or winter by stripping or flailing branches onto drop cloths and lightly macerate the fruits in water to remove the seeds. Dry the seeds in a cool, dark place for planting in the spring, with sprouting expected the following year. The seeds are difficult to germinate and stratification is necessary because of hard seed coats and immature embryos. Warm stratification for 3-4 months followed by cold for 4-6 months is necessary.

Wildlife Uses:

One of the most important elements of native plants is the biodiversity they bring. The dense branching and thick leaf canopy of coralberry provides good cover for a variety of wildlife.

Insects: The flowers attract bees, wasps, and flies. The caterpillars of the moths *Hemaris diffinis* (Snowberry Clearwing), *Hemaris thysbe* (Hummingbird Clearwing), and *Hesperumia sulphuraria* (Sulfur Moth) feed on the foliage. The aphid *Apathargelia symphoricarpi* and the thrips *Thrips winnemanae* suck juices from the undersides of the leaves.

Birds: The berries persist into the fall and winter and are eaten primarily by Robins (*Turdus migratorius*); the buds and berries are also eaten by the Bobwhite.

Mammals: Coralberry is a favorite food plant of the White-Tailed Deer, *Odocoileus virginianus*, and it is often heavily browsed. Think of it as the deer pruning it back for you every spring.

One last note: Why do the berries remain through most of the winter? They contain saponin, a natural detergent that is mildly toxic in small quantities and can cause digestive upset in humans and small mammals.

Symphoricarpos orbiculatus = SYOR, Coralberry, Indian Currant, Devil’s Shoestring, Buckbrush