

Growing Guide: Beautyberry

American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) is a beloved shrub native to the Southeastern U.S. Growing up to 5' tall, it has long, arching branches, medium green foliage, and small, white or pink flowers that create a pleasant if unremarkable plant in spring and summer.

The real show begins in late summer when clusters of stunning, lavender-magenta, berry-like fruits hug the branches at close intervals. The color is unusual enough in summer, but these berries offer their beauty in fall, and sometimes into winter, when such color is most welcome.



Fun Facts

- The genus name *Callicarpa* is derived from the Greek *callos*, meaning “beauty,” and *carpos*, meaning “fruit.”
- In the early 1900s, farmers rubbed crushed leaves on themselves and their horses to repel mosquitoes.
- Native Americans made tea from the roots and leaves and used in sweat baths for rheumatism, fevers, and malaria.
- The berries on beautyberry are, botanically speaking, drupes. Drupes contain one or more seeds with each seed enclosed in a hard endocarp.
- The berries are non-toxic but have an unpleasant taste.
- The berries are eaten by birds, including robins, purple finches, and eastern towhees, but aren't their first choice, so the berries often remain into winter until the birds exhaust other food sources.

Choosing a Planting Site

Beautyberries prefer sun to part shade. In the wild, they're most often found at the edge of woodlands, or as understory plants. They adapt to a wide variety of soils, but a loose, organic-rich soil will result in the healthiest plants.

Plants or Seeds?

The easiest way to grow beautyberries is by purchasing plants. Because birds regularly disperse the seeds, you'll sometimes find

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shrubs growing in the wild. If you have permission of the landowner, these wild shrubs may be transplanted.

Growing the plant from seed isn't difficult, but there are several detailed steps to separating the seed from its outer covering. An online search will give details. You'll need to be patient, too, as it will take years from seed to berry-producing shrub.

Care

Apply an inch or two of compost under the shrub each spring. Unless soil is extremely poor, the plant shouldn't need fertilizer. Take extra care not to apply nitrogen-rich fertilizer (including lawn fertilizer) near the shrub. This can result in more foliage and fewer flowers and berries.

Once the plant is established (usually the second or third year) it should need watering only in times of drought or extreme heat.

To keep the plant in bounds and fruiting well, in late winter prune off the oldest stems right back to the base. Berries are formed on newer growth. In colder regions where the plant is marginally hardy, some gardeners cut the entire plant back to about 6" and cover with bark mulch. The plant will resume growth with vigor in spring.

The shrubs are rarely bothered by diseases or pests.

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