

## PLANT IN THE SPOTLIGHT

### *Cyrilla racemiflora*: A Southern Native Adapted to Northern Climes

by Eva Monheim

**M**Y INTRODUCTION TO swamp cyrilla (*Cyrilla racemiflora*, USDA Hardiness Zones 6–10, AHS Heat Zones 12–5) came more than 30 years ago when I visited my aunt at her home near Doylestown, Pennsylvania. The garden featured an array of uncommon plants including cyrilla, which is also known by intriguing common names such as leatherwood and swamp titi.

The nurseryowner who sold the cyrilla to my aunt told her it would grow no more than three to four feet in height and width. This claim lost veracity after only a few years, and my aunt now has a beautiful, small tree that stands 12 feet tall and 15 feet in diameter. Cyrilla usually matures into a large shrub or small tree and has been known to reach 30 feet tall and wide in the wild.

#### FOUR-SEASON INTEREST

Cyrilla offers appealing ornamental characteristics nearly year round. The oblong, alternate leaves have a reflective glossy finish and are deciduous to semi-evergreen, depending on the region where the tree is growing. The emerging spring foliage is a vivid green color that darkens in summer. Fall color is wonderfully handsome in orange, red, and burgundy shades.

In spring to midsummer, depending on region, tiny, deliciously fragrant, white to cream-colored flowers bloom densely along spikelike racemes four to six inches in length. The racemes form in starlike clusters that emerge at the tips of the previous year's growth. In the Philadelphia region, flowering begins in late June and persists for almost a month before the for-



Left: Cyrilla usually grows as a large shrub or small tree in gardens. Above: Its leaves turn to orange or red in fall.

mation of seed capsules that eventually turn russet brown and remain on the plant through the winter.

#### GARDEN USE

The rich, acidic, humus-rich soil and moist riverside woodland location that my aunt chose for the cyrilla was similar to much of cyrilla's native habitat in the southeastern United States. In the wild, cyrilla ranges along the coastal plain from Virginia and Delaware south to Florida and into eastern Texas. It is also found in the West Indies and along the eastern coast of South America into Brazil. In the Southeast, cyrilla spreads by suckering stems and typically develops into large thickets. It is often found growing with other moisture-tolerant understory natives such as inkberry (*Ilex glabra*), southern bayberry (*Myrica cerifera*), and summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*).

Among a limited number of cyrilla selections is 'Scott Arboretum', which is billed as a cold-hardy form by RareFind-

Nursery in New Jersey. A selection called 'Graniteville', made by Robert McCartney of Woodlanders Nursery in South Carolina, is reportedly slower growing and smaller leaved than the species.

Adaptable to sites ranging from full sun to part or near full shade, cyrilla is not affected by any serious diseases or pests. It will thrive in moist to wet acidic soils high in organic content and tolerates seasonal flooding.

If you are fond of wildlife, cyrilla is an excellent addition to the garden, providing nourishment and shelter for a wide variety of creatures. Orchard bees (*Osmia lignaria*), eastern tiger swallowtail butterflies (*Papilio glaucus*), and summer azure butterflies (*Celastrina neglecta*) are among the pollinators drawn to the flowers. If you plant it, they will come.

*Eva Monheim is a senior lecturer in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Horticulture at Temple University.*

#### Sources

**Growing Wild Nursery**, Burgaw, NC. (910) 200-2112. [www.growingwildnursery.net](http://www.growingwildnursery.net).

**RareFindNursery**, Jackson, NJ. (732) 833-0613. [www.rarefindnursery.com](http://www.rarefindnursery.com).

**Woodlanders, Inc.**, Aiken, SC. (803) 648-7522. [www.woodlanders.net](http://www.woodlanders.net).