

# Secret Sarvis: Summer's Unsung Berry Offers Feast

by R. Kelly Coffey

The sarvistree (*Amelanchier arborea*) is widespread throughout eastern North America, being found as far south as the Gulf Coast.

Despite its ubiquity, we seem to have a special claim on the tree here in the Southern Appalachians; perhaps because flowering sarvistrees are highly visible on the vertical mountainsides, and consequently more recognized.

Most mountain residents are familiar with early springsarvis blooms, even if they cannot identify the tree itself. While almost all other trees are still dormant, white masses of flowering sarvis cannot be missed on hills void of foliage. The sarvis is seemingly forgotten, how-



Sarvis berries range in color from bright red to deep purple

Photo: Kelly Coffey

## Naturalist's Notebook

ever, as other trees leaf-out and literally overshadow it. But the sarvistree is possibly at its finest in early summer, when its berries- the result of those brilliant blooms- are ripe and readily available for a variety of uses.

### Church Sarvis

The name "sarvis" is so common and accepted that many are unaware the name is actually the word "service" (as in church service), pronounced with an Appalachian accent. Explanations vary as to the connection of the tree with a particular church service.

One reference has to do with circuit-riding preachers who began their route to frontier communities in early spring. Weddings and funerals were delayed throughout the winter until the preacher arrived to conduct the proper services. Since these services usually coincided with the blooming of *Amelanchier arborea*, the flowers were cut to provide ornamentation for the ceremonies, and thus took the name.

Another tradition identifies the tree strictly with Easter services. One explanation does not associate the tree with a specific service, just the fact that its early flowering meant that it was the

first cut flower of the season brought into churches.

Few flowering trees can match the reliability of the annual sarvis bloom. The trees bloom consistently from year to year, with weather conditions seemingly having little effect.

Recently, I found it necessary to cut and discard a limb from a sarvis tree during the winter, with the end of the severed branch inadvertently becoming buried in loose soil. Despite its condition, the branch - lying on the ground - bloomed profusely the following spring, as if it were still attached to the tree.

While the blooms themselves are a rather ordinary white, the contrast with the emerging leaves creates an impressive color effect. The leaves appear as elongated, dark red buds at the time the stringy white blooms open. The blending of these two color extremes forms a distinctive contrast, setting-off the flowers in a way that would not be possible without the background of the leaves.

The sarvistree can be found in a wide variety of habitats, from swampy lowlands to the spruce-fir forests at the peaks of mountains; as well as dry, rocky sites. It competes well with other trees

in the middle of a forest, and it is also common along the edge of the forest and in open areas. The tree is botanically classified in the Rose family (*Rosaceae*), and the apple subfamily (*Pomoideae*).

Many field guides list several species of what is commonly known as the sarvistree, but some botanists claim that these are only slight variations of the same species. The tree is also known by as many as thirty common names. "Juneberry" and "Indian pear" obviously refer to the berries, while the name "shadbush" is a reference to the fact that the flowering of the tree coincides with the upstream migration of shad fish along the Atlantic coast.

### Summer Encore

Without a doubt, the most familiar characteristic of the sarvistree is the aesthetic beauty of its early spring flowers. But the tree offers a more practical service a couple of months later, in early summer.

The sarvisberry is one of the most useful, yet unappreciated, wild berries. About the size of wild blueberries, purplish-red sarvisberries usually hang above eye-level, and thus are not as readily visible or reachable as the more popular blackberries or strawberries.

But sarvistrees do not grow tall and, with a little effort, the berries on the lower limbs are accessible. Sarvisberries can be used in the same manner as blueberries: eaten raw, baked into muffins, or served with pancakes.

The berries were utilized much more in the past, especially among the Indians. Native Americans would crush sarvisberries into a paste and allow it to dry. The dried fruit was then used as an ingredient in various dishes or in pemmican that could be stored and eaten when convenient. Indians also utilized the roots and bark of sarvis to treat various ailments.

We often place much emphasis on rare and threatened species, and rightfully so. Yet the most common and available flora and fauna are frequently unrecognized or taken for granted. Sarvis deserves a place alongside other summer berries as popular and useful wild food.

R. Kelly Coffey writes from Boone, NC

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