Native plants usher in fall with colorful displays

In Northwest Florida, autumn is welcomed by an array of beautiful fall-blooming native plants. American beautyberry, salt-bush and firebush are just a few of the native shrubs that are at their showiest in the fall.

American beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana*, is a native to the southeastern United States. It derives its scientific name, *Callicarpa*, from two Greek words: kallos meaning beauty and karpos meaning fruit.

The beauty is found in the berries (technically called drupes) which turn a brilliantly colored purple upon ripening in September and October followed by purplish colored foliage. The berries, which are arranged in small clumps that circle the stem, remain on the branches after the leaves have fallen and into the first breaths of winter unless the birds or other animals eat them.

At maturity, this deciduous shrub reaches around six feet tall and six feet wide with a gentle weeping habit. Though happiest in partial sun, beautyberry will produce more berries when grown in full sun. It will grow in many different soil conditions but prefers wet to moist soil. It can, however, withstand drought once established.

Salt-bush or *Baccharis halimifolia* is often overlook as a landscape plant. It can be found in its native habitat in wet sites along with wax myrtle. The whitish flowers and fruits bring this rarely-noticed plant into view in the fall landscape.

Salt-bush is rarely planted by landscapers, perhaps because it is too ‘common’ in native stands. A useful shrub or small tree for reclaiming wet sites, salt-bush could be used more frequently near retention basins and...
drainage ditches. It has a good tolerance to brackish water.

With proper care to remove recurring dead wood, attractive small tree specimens can be created. These can become nice additions to the landscape. They come into flower and are attractive at a time when few other small trees and shrubs are flowering.

As the monarch butterflies migrate through the Panhandle, salt-bush is a must visit. Butterflies are strongly attracted to large clusters of small-tubed flowers that form a stable platform on which to land. Salt-bush meets the needs of countless butterflies each year.

Firebush, known botanically as *Hamelia patens*, is a heat and sun loving plant. Also known as the hummingbird bush and scarlet bush, it is native to Florida.

Firebush is a densely branched perennial that will get about three to four feet tall in the Florida Panhandle. The pointed leaves are handsome with their pinkish veins and red petioles. It is a tender perennial along our Gulf Coast, freezing back in the winter and resprouting each spring.

Blooming begins in late summer when the plant explodes with terminal clusters of scarlet to orange colored flowers. The individual flowers are tubular and about one inch long. The small tubular flowers are a favorite of butterflies and hummingbirds and are regarded as a premier butterfly nectar plant. Flowers are followed by small, purplish berries that are eaten by a number of birds and other small animals.

Firebush grows in a wide range of soil types as long as it drains well. Once established, it is drought tolerant and has moderate salt tolerance. Full sun or partially shaded locations are preferable to shady ones which will result in reduced blooming and leggy growth. This shrub requires little maintenance. It naturally has a somewhat rounded form but some pruning will keep it bushy and in scale.

Try planting these native plants if you want showy plants in early fall that are beneficial to butterflies and wildlife.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee,
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