Cephalanthus occidentalis

Family: Rubiaceae

Buttonbush; button willow; pincushion flower; snowball; globe-flower

Synonyms (discarded names): None found
Origin: From Eastern Canada south to Texas and Florida, north-central U.S.A., to Central California
U.S.D.A. Zone: 5-10 (Minimum –20°F)
Plant type: Shrub; occasionally a small tree
Growth Rate: Moderate
Light requirements: Full sun; partial shade
Flower color: White
Flowering Months: Primarily March - August
Leaf Persistence: Deciduous; semi-deciduous in south Florida
Soil Salt Tolerance: Low
Drought Tolerance: None
Soil requirements: Moist
Nutritional Requirements: Low
Major Pests: None
Typical Dimensions: 10 feet with a spread of 6-8 feet
Propagation: Seeds; cuttings planted in moist, sandy soil
Human hazards: Bark contains a poison that can induce vomiting, paralysis and convulsions.
Uses: Shoreline planting; wet sites; wildlife; reclamation; naturalist gardens and landscapes; rain gardens.

Natural geographic distribution
Buttonbush grows naturally in freshwater wetlands at the margins of swamps and ponds and in marshy roadside ditches. It is one of the few temperate shrubs that extends its range into the tropics. The plants in the United States and Canada are known from New Brunswick and Ontario, south to Florida, and west to Texas, Arizona and Central California. It also ranges into Central America and Cuba. It is not found in the Bahamas.
Ecological and Ethnobotany Functions

Buttonbush can be a pioneer species in frequently flooded swamps by establishing itself on rotting logs and stumps. The flowers attract butterflies, bees and hummingbirds. The seeds are a food source for ducks and shorebirds. The ducks also use the plant for shelter. Indigenous people used the plant for treating toothaches, eye trouble and several internal maladies including diarrhea and stomach aches. Europeans and Americans also used the plant to treat various ailments until it was found that the side effects were worse than the malady being treated. Buttonbush contains toxins that can destroy blood corpuscles and lead to death. The leaves are toxic to horses.
**Growth Habit**

The buttonbush shrub can grow to become a small tree but usually does not attain a height of more than 10 to 12 feet. This multi-stemmed, rounded bush has arching branches and a somewhat open and spreading appearance. Trees remain little-branched because apical dominance is strong. The coarse stems are almost 4-sided. Stem color varies from gray-brown to shiny olive, turning reddish-brown with age. The bark is smooth, becoming ridged and furrowed, often with vertical, raised, corky lenticels. These lenticels enlarge into fissures on older stems. Buttonbush shrubs can form colonies from self-sown seedlings and root sprouts. The plant has a disheveled, scruffy appearance due to the dying of leader shoots, which leave dead and dying stumps. In south Florida, this species remains more or less evergreen although it is deciduous further north.

**Leaves**

The simple, petiolate, dark green, glossy leaves vary in size, from 2 to 7 inches long and 2-3 inches wide, with an ovate, or elliptic shape and pointed tip. They are arranged in opposite pairs or whorled in groups of three or four (varying on a given plant). The leaves have a yellow midrib and prominent, depressed veins. Upper leaf surfaces are glossy green, the undersides are dull, sometimes glabrous (smooth and hairless).
Flowers
Flowers are sessile, borne terminally on the twigs of the current season growth. They are bisexual, compound, staminous with many florets of fused white tubular corolla. These 1-1½” flower spheres are on long pedicels with many white stamens extending beyond the corollas and topped by yellow anthers.

After flowering, the flower heads turn into one inch, ball-shaped, brown fruit, splitting into two to four nutlets. The fruits persist on the plant throughout the winter. The nutlets are inversely pyramidal, with the attachment at the narrower end.

Maintenance Guidelines
Buttonbush is well suited as an understory shrub for moderate to wet soil. It does best in wet sites with poor drainage in full sun to part shade. The plant typically requires moderate irrigation, especially in drier situations. It will colonize much of the water’s edge if left unattended along lakes or ponds. Buttonbush is difficult to established on the “fill” soils of South Florida. The shrub responds well to pruning and can be kept to a small size in the landscape. It is moderately long-lived. In rare cases it can live for as long as 50 years.
References


Useful Links
South Florida Native Plant Fact Sheets
Stephen Brown’s YouTubes
Coccoloba Chapter of Florida Native Plant Society
Native Plant and Service Directory

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