

Ask a Master Gardener Article
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Serviceberry

My grandmother keeps reminiscing about the sarvis jelly that was made from berries that she and her mother gathered from trees growing along streams and fence rows. I have never heard of a sarvis tree. What is it?

Lynn C.

Perhaps the other common names which include serviceberry, shadbush and juneberry might be more familiar to you. A member of the rose family, the Latin name for this native tree or shrub is *Amelanchier arborea*, and its fruit does indeed make very tasty jelly that is similar in flavor to a combination of a blueberry and a cranberry. At one time, it could be seen along the edges of plowed fields, wood lines, open stream banks, and as in your grandmother's case, along fence rows. Occasionally one might still spot a serviceberry along a fence row as it bursts into flower in early spring.

There are several explanations as to how the serviceberry got its name. One account is that the tree blooms in the spring near the time of Easter, and so it is a reminder that it is time for the Easter Service. Another story is that the bloom signals that the ground is thawed enough to bury those that have died during the winter. So the service in this case was a funeral service. The term sarvis that your grandmother uses is thought to be a corruption of the word service. The name shadbush alludes to the fact that the flowers tend to occur at the same time the shad go up the rivers in early spring to spawn. Finally, the common name of juneberry is simply because the berries usually ripen in the month of June.

Serviceberry is a small tree or shrub that is worth adding to one's property, as it delivers four seasons of interest. Blooming a bit earlier in spring than redbud and dogwood, it puts on a beautiful show of slightly fragrant white blooms that hang in clusters and appear before the leaves. The flowers give way to small, round green berries which turn red and finally mature to a dark purplish-black in early summer. The berries resemble blueberries in size and color. In the fall, there is a brilliant display of foliage ranging from yellow and orange to rusty red. Lastly, a mature tree's gray bark with longitudinal fissures adds ornamental quality to the winter landscape.

Today, if you want to harvest serviceberries, you don't have to find them in the wild. As the value of the tree has grown as an ornamental, the nursery industry has responded and offers many varieties for landscape use. Reaching a height of 15 to 25 feet, serviceberry is easily grown, and is not very particular about soil type. It thrives in full sun to part shade, and tolerates a small amount of moisture such as near a pond. Root suckers are common, and if not removed, will result in a shrubby growth habit.

In addition to being a beautiful tree, serviceberry is beneficial to local wildlife. Pollinators that are eager to find a nectar and pollen source in early spring will gravitate to the early blossoms. In return, their pollination helps the tree produce delicious berries for early summer. Additionally, birds feed on the pollinators as an early food source for their nestlings. Birds are also fond of the berries, so you will need to beat them to the harvest if you are planning on making jelly or a pie. There will probably be enough to share!

For more information on all of your horticulture questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Extension Office at 900 Newnan Road, Carrollton at 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu.