

Bottlebrush Buckeye—Summer Delight

By Susan Camp

It is always a pleasure to receive a question or a request from a reader or friend to write a column on a specific topic. Actually, it is a twofold pleasure: Not only does it mean that I don't have to search for a topic that week, it also means that people are reading the "Gardening Corner."

This week's column is one that that was suggested by a Gazette-Journal reader who lives in Kilmarnock. He is impressed by the two massive bottlebrush buckeye shrubs on the right side of Route 14 in Gloucester heading toward Mathews. He thinks they are "champion," and indeed they are. I notice them every time I drive to Mathews, but I had never stopped to look at them until a few days ago.

Bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*) is a deciduous shrub native to the southeastern United States. It is a member of the Sapindaceae or soapberry family. Other bottlebrush buckeye relatives that are native to eastern North America include the Ohio buckeye, the red and yellow buckeyes, and the painted buckeye. Two other buckeye species are native to the western United States. The horse chestnut, planted in some northeastern cities as a street tree, is a Balkan native.

Bottlebrush buckeye grows in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 8 and is winter hardy through Zone 5. Its usual height range is 8 to 12 feet, but it can reach 15 feet at maturity, with a similar spread, which means that it needs a lot of room to grow. Bottlebrush buckeye works best at the back of a border, as a privacy hedge, or freestanding in light shade under large trees. In full shade, this shrub will not produce as many flowers. Massed or planted in pairs, as are the ones on Route 14, bottlebrush buckeyes are exceptionally eye-catching.

A. parviflora is a mounded, multi-stemmed, suckering shrub, although the suckers tend to stay close to the original plant and don't travel far, which means that over time each shrub will form a dense, dark-green thicket. The large, palmate (hand-shaped) compound leaves change from dark green to a striking yellow in the fall. Each leaflet is 3 to 8 inches long and 1 to 4 inches wide.

The cylindrical panicles of tiny white flowers are the bottlebrush buckeye's crowning glory. Despite the homely name—the flowers really do resemble bottle brushes-- these shrubs put on a spectacular display in June and July. The 8- to 12-inch-long flowers with pink stamens and red anthers arise candle-like from almost horizontal stems. The stamen is the male reproductive part of a flower. It is usually a long, silky filament. The anther is the little protrusion at the end of the stamen where pollen is produced. Both structures are obvious on the bottlebrush buckeye and add to the attractiveness of the flowers. Eastern swallowtail butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees flock to these shrubs.

The fruit of *A. parviflora* is a leathery yellow seed capsule that contains 1 to 3 brown seeds, each with a characteristic "buck's eye" scar. All parts of the shrub and other buckeye species contain toxic chemicals and are poisonous to humans. Symptoms of buckeye poisoning include

gastrointestinal distress, dilated pupils, muscle weakness, paralysis, convulsions, and stupor. Buckeyes cause similar symptoms in dogs, cats, and horses.

Bottlebrush buckeye prefers rich, moist loams, but will grow in any average, moist, well-drained soil. It does not tolerate dry soil, especially when newly planted, and is susceptible to leaf scorch. The good news is that this shrub tolerates wet soil, rabbits, and deer and rarely needs pruning. If a shrub gets out of control, it can be rejuvenated by pruning to the ground. There are no serious disease or insect pest problems.

See the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Aesculus parviflora*”; the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach publication “Bottlebrush Buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*)”; and North Carolina State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “Bottlebrush buckeye: *Aesculus parviflora*” for further information.

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