

Calycanthus 'Aphrodite,' Long-Blooming and Deer Resistant, Too

By Susan Camp

One topic that frequently arose two weeks ago at Extension Master Gardeners College was the statewide deer problem. Master Gardeners from Alexandria, Virginia Beach, Blacksburg, Winchester, and Gloucester all complained about losing azalea and daylily buds, hosta leaves and flowers, and other greenery to roaming bands of deer that have set up feeding stations in communities all over the Commonwealth. The problem seems to grow worse every year, and no one seems to have a solution.

Deer are elegant, graceful, beautiful mammals. The bucks are majestic and the does lovingly care for their sweet fawns. I just wish they didn't like to sample my plants, and I hope that someone will discover a magic potion to make them enjoy grazing on Japanese stiltgrass and English ivy rather than my expensive perennials.

We have tried every spray and pellet repellent on the internet; hung bags of fragrant soap in the beds; put out little devices that flash a red light and emit a sound we can't hear but the deer can. Every new smelly chemical and nifty gadget work for a while, until rain and irrigation wash away the odor, and the deer figure out that nothing is going to happen once the sound fades away. Our latest method to disperse the deer is a bright motion sensor light that Jim installed on the woodshed. The deer will eventually catch on to that, too, and simply continue munching the daylilies and hostas.

We have designed a new plan that Jim will complete before they figure out that the motion sensor light is harmless. Jim removed all of the daylilies to the other side of the house, where the deer rarely venture. The former daylily bed has been weeded and composted and now contains several *Hypericum* (St. John's wort) and *Calycanthus* 'Aphrodite' shrubs. Both are listed as deer resistant.

'Aphrodite' is a hybrid between native *C. floridus* (Carolina allspice or sweetshrub) x *C. sinocalycanthus*, the Asian species. *C. 'Aphrodite'* was a 2021 Proven Winners ColorChoice selection. It will grow in USDA Hardiness Zones 5a to 9b.

'Aphrodite' is a deciduous perennial shrub with big, glossy, green leaves and a dense, rounded growth habit. It can reach a height of 6 to 8 feet with a similar spread, so it needs plenty of room to grow. Large, showy, dark red, magnolia-like flowers with seven to twelve petals bloom profusely from May through July. The fragrance of sweetshrub flowers is enticing. Flowers can smell like pineapple, apple, strawberry, or bubblegum, and some flowers may have no fragrance at all. The leaves, stems, and bark are fragrant when bruised.

Plant 'Aphrodite' in full sun to part shade, although it will tolerate full shade and will grow taller in deep shade. It needs some protection in summer from the afternoon sun. It prefers moist, rich loamy soil with good drainage, but will tolerate clay and can handle occasional dry periods and

flooding, although it may suffer during prolonged periods of drought. ‘Aphrodite’ grows well in acidic, neutral, or alkaline soil.

‘Aphrodite’ blooms on old and new wood, so prune your shrub immediately after flowering; otherwise, it may get out of control. The only real downside to ‘Aphrodite’ is that it produces suckers, so you will have to vigilantly remove suckers unless you want the shrub to naturalize.

Calycanthus floridus and its cultivars and hybrids are relatively pest and disease free. They attract butterflies, bees, and other pollinators. The fruit is a leathery, copper brown, urn-shaped capsule that contains several single-seeded fruits called achenes. The attractive fruit capsules appear in August and September. ‘Aphrodite’ is sterile and will most likely not produce seeds. If it does, the seeds will not be true to the hybrid.

See NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entries “*Calycanthus floridus*,” “*Calycanthus ‘Aphrodite’*,” and other sweetshrub species and cultivars for more information on these lovely flowering shrubs. Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder lists deer resistance in many plant entries.