

# Guide to the Clethra Collection

## Sweet Pepperbush

Walking near wet or lowland areas in July and August, one can be entranced by a sweet fragrance filling the air. This late summer scent is often noticed before locating sweet pepperbush in the wild. A member of the white alder family (*Clethraceae*), sweet pepperbush is naturally a swamp plant, found in low, wet places, and along the banks of streams, but can be grown on drier soils.

This late-flowering shrub, also known as summersweet, possesses a showy inflorescence of very fragrant flowers. This unusual combination of late bloom and fragrance make sweet pepperbush a welcome addition to any landscape. Ranging in form from compact to columnar, and in flower from white to pink, this plant has only recently become popular in the home garden. With more than ten introductions in the past decade, there are now over one dozen cultivars available.

Because the flowers of the inflorescence (this type called a raceme) open gradually from the base to the tip, there is an extended period of both flower and fragrance. This flowering pattern is referred to as indeterminate. Looking more closely at the structure of the plant through a hand lens, one will notice hairs on the stems and flowers arranged as perfect stars.

Mature specimens of our native sweet pepperbush may grow to a height of ten feet or more. Many of these larger plants can be found along the Swamp Walk at Highstead. The dried flower capsules remain on the shrub through most of the winter, an aid to identification during the dormant season.

## References

*Bailey Hortorium*, 1976, *Hortus III*, MacMillan Co., New York, 1290p.

*Dirr, Michael A.*, 1998, *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*, Stipes Publishing Co., Champaign, IL, 1187p.

*Keeler, Harriet L.*, 1969, *Our Northern Shrubs*, Dover Publications, NY, 539p.

## Sources

*Broken Arrow Nursery*, Hamden, Connecticut

*Twombly Nursery*, Monroe, Connecticut

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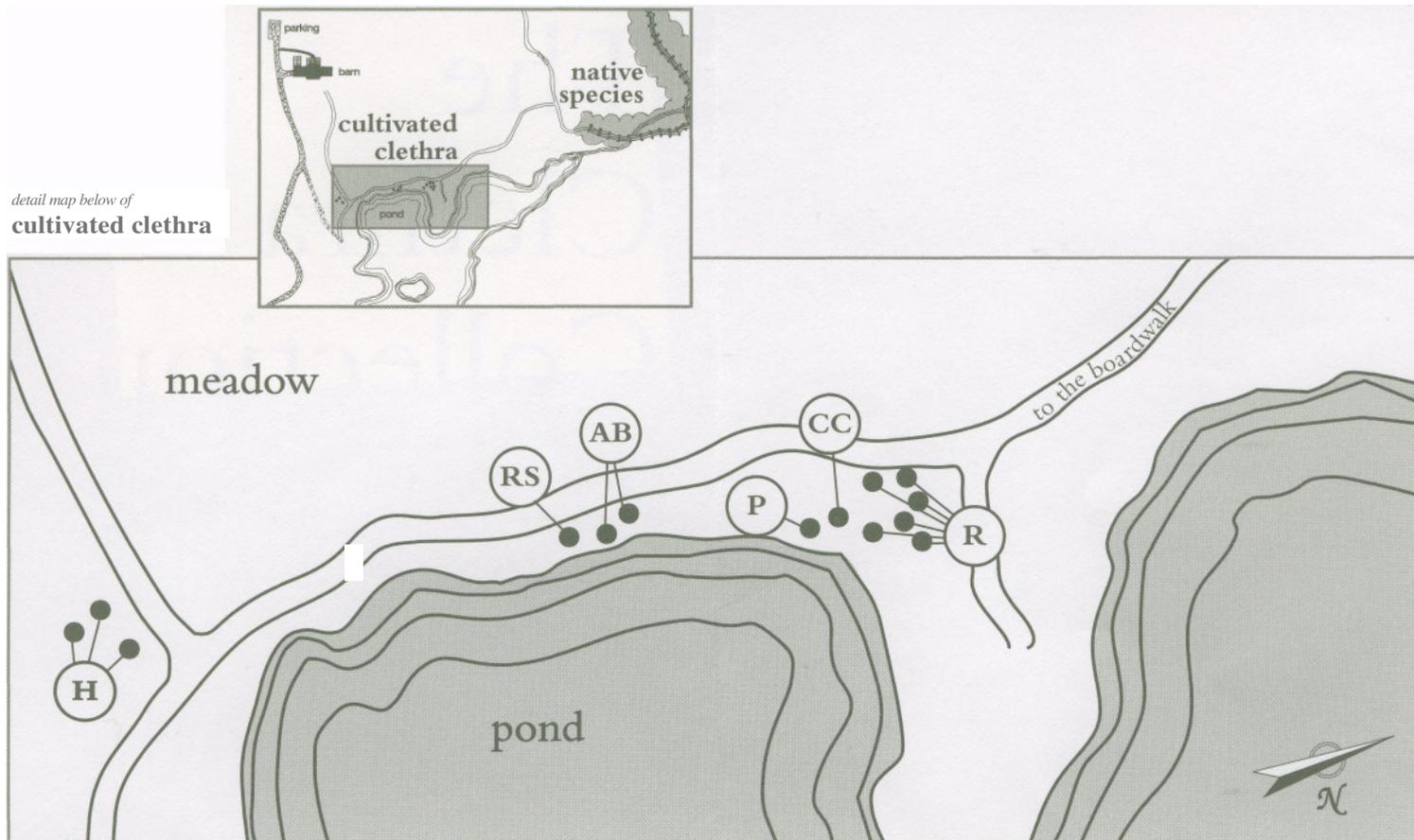
# The Clethra Collection

## A Self-guided Tour of Native and Cultivated Sweet Pepperbush



*Highstead Arboretum*

# Highstead Arboretum's Clethra Collection



## Viewing the Collection

Just as the native stand of mountain laurel has served as the inspiration for the *Kalmia* Collection at Highstead, so has the native stand of sweet pepperbush inspired the *Clethra* Collection.

The native stand of *Clethra alnifolia* is visible from the boardwalk through the swamp. The massing and form of these plants is typical of this species when observed in the wild.

The cultivated sweet pepperbush (detailed in the map above) represent approximately half of the currently available cultivars.

Begin this tour on the side of the barn opposite the terrace. Follow the grass path through the meadow toward the pond. The first of the cultivated sweet pepperbush will be found on the right hand side of the grass path before reaching the gravel. Follow the gravel accessway to the left to view the rest of the cultivars along the pond's edge.

To reach the boardwalk, continue on the gravel path into the woodland. Be sure to turn right at the first intersection. The trail will lead you through a thicket of laurel and down a gentle slope to the swamp and boardwalk.

## sweet pepperbush *Clethra alnifolia*

Species/Cultivar	Map Code	Qualities
species		Fragrant white flowers, the species is native to Highstead Arboretum.
'Anne Bidwell'	AB	Large, multi-branched inflorescences, often later flowering than the species; white flowers.
'Hummingbird'	H	This award winning cultivar is compact, semi-dwarf; spreads to colonize by rhizomes, white flowers.
'Paniculata'		Large, multi-branched inflorescences, dark green foliage, white flowers.
'Rosea'	R	Flower buds are pink, opening to soft pink and then fading to pinkish-white; dark green leaves.
'Ruby Spice'	RS	Deep pink flower buds, opening to the darkest pink flowers currently available.