



August 2010

Plants of the Month

Summersweet, Sweet Pepperbush *Clethra alnifolia*

A sweet fragrance wafting through the July and August air, along with white panicles blooming on lustrous green foliage, makes summersweet an underutilized star of the summer garden. Flowering for 4 to 6 weeks when few shrubs are in bloom, turning an attractive yellow-gold in fall, and being avoided by deer makes it even more desirable. This 4 to 8 foot native shrub is easy to grow in part shade or full sun and moist, acid soil. More varieties in various sizes and with pink flowers are appearing in nurseries as the advantages of this hardy native become more well known.



Fig *Ficus carica*

Yes, with care you can grow figs in Maryland. This subtropical grows 15-30' tall in average soil and full sun. Hardy to 15-20 degrees, it will spring back if killed to the ground. However, to produce ripe fruit reliably, figs need a long hot growing season and protection from freezing temperatures. A protected southern exposure is recommended. Avoid low spots where cold air settles. Brown Turkey and Celeste are two reliable cultivars here. Figs pruned to a shrub are easier to protect than a tree shape. In fall, pin pliable branches to the ground and cover, or encircle the fig with chicken wire or bubble wrap and fill with leaves or straw. Alternatively, plant in a container and overwinter in a garage. In spring remove winter protection after danger of frost.



Butterfly weed

Asclepias tuberosa

Butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees flock to this mid-summer perennial flower. Besides brilliant orange, its clusters of tiny flowers come in yellow or red-orange. Leaves are a favorite food of the monarch butterfly caterpillar. After blooming, flowers turn into long seed capsules like small milkweed pods which are attractive in dried arrangements. Left on the plant, they split open and release feathery white fluffs blown away on the wind, each carrying one seed. Long-lived, this native of meadows and plains prefers full sun and tolerates drought and most soils except very wet ones. Butterfly weed is slow to emerge in spring, so mark its location to prevent accidental damage.

