SHADBUSH
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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

THIS is a wonderful part of the world for wild flowering shrubs. In England the most exciting things in the spring are the little wild flowers, the primroses, cowslips, bluebells and wild orchids. In Virginia the flowers share honors at least equally with the shrubs. And the very first shrub to show any bloom around here in the spring is the shadbush, Amelanchier canadensis. The white flowers appearing in the lower layers of the woods look like little drifts of snow—and may, in fact, be intermingled with patches of snow, since they bloom so early that they are sometimes surprised by a late winter storm. We start watching for the flowers in late February and are usually rewarded at least by early March. If the spring is a cool one, shadbush may flower until May. In June it produces a purplish berry, like a small apple and known technically as a pome. This is edible but rather tasteless, although many birds do not agree with the latter judgment. If it is not eaten by something, the berry will persist on the plant all through the summer. When the leaves drop in the fall, next year’s buds are already present, and stay on the plant all winter ready to give us one of our first real bits of spring.

Amelanchier belongs to one of the largest and most ubiquitous families of flowering plants, the Rosaceae. In this family, the flowers are almost always regular, with five sepals, five petals and numerous stamens inserted on the calyx. Amelanchier is a large and rather difficult genus since many of the species interbreed to produce confusing hybrids. Typically, A. canadensis is a shrub with several stems, or a small tree 5-30 feet high with a single trunk. The leaves are usually elliptical, pointed at the tip and with finely toothed serrations all round the edge. The white flowers are arranged in long, nodding racemes. The sepals are sharply reflexed at the tip, the petals are about 3/4" long, thin and straplike, and there are numerous yellowish stamens.

Shadbush grows in all the eastern seaboard states from Georgia to Maine, and occurs westward to Iowa, Kansas and Missouri. It is widespread in thickets, woodlands and hillsides, preferring usually a fairly acid soil. It is a common early arrival in recently burned and newly populated clearings or other disturbed habitats. The wood of the shad tree is very hard and heavy (50 pounds to the cubic foot) and can be used for tool and umbrella handles, cabinet work, fishing rods and canes. In the carpentry trade it is known as lance wood.

The word Amelanchier comes from the Savoy region of France where it is applied to the medlar, a small sour apple quite closely related to our shadbush. Shad acquired its common name because it starts to bloom at about the same that the shad start to “run,” that is, to come into the rivers to spawn, another early spring event. The shrub is known both as shadbush and shadblow and also has a number of other common names. May cherry and June berry obviously refer to the early berries which the plant produces, and the name serviceberry comes from Europe where it is used as the common name for the fruit of the service tree, Pyrus domestica.

Shadbushes can be transplanted if small plants are selected, and they are carefully dug up with a large part of their root system in a good ball of earth. Like many shrubs after moving, they may make very little progress above ground for several years, concentrating (one always hopes!) on their roots and merely thickening their existing stems, but they will start to grow again above ground eventually.

January and February are the only really thin months in this state for lovers of the out-of-doors. We should all be grateful to the shadbush for a kind of official sign that this season is over for another year.