In Nature's Garden:

Sweetshrub

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The Calycanthaceae is a very small family of aromatic shrubs with seven species contained in only two genera, Calycanthus in North America and Chimonanthus in Asia. Around here we have two species of Calycanthus. C. fertilis is found in mountain regions while C. floridus, known variously as sweetshrub, sweet Betsy, strawberry shrub or Carolina allspice, occurs in rich woods at all elevations. Calycanthus floridus grows to about nine feet high and has simple, narrowly ovate, opposite leaves which are quite hairy underneath. This downy underside contrasts with the smooth leaf-backs of the mountain species. The flowers are terminal blooms, that is, they occur at the ends of the main and side branches, and they are a deep maroon-red color. There are many sepals, petaloid and colored like the petals and united at the base to form a cup. It is this feature which gives the flower its generic name, from the Greek calyx—a cup or calyx, and anthos—a flower. Floridus, of course, simply means flowering. There are numerous short stamens inserted just inside the petals. Some of the stamens are sterile and also are petaloid. They curve inward over the calyx tube, inside which are inserted many small pistils. This arrangement probably minimizes the chance of self-fertilization.

Calycanthus floridus does not produce many fruits, but the few that do develop are very large and hang down rather like over-ripe figs. They have thick, tawny, outer coverings and each one contains twenty or more mahogany-red seeds which are reputed to be poisonous. When a seed germinates, it produces two large, flaring dicotyledons which lie on the surface for several weeks looking as if a big green butterfly were resting on the ground. The new plant eventually grows up between the leaves. C. fertilis, the mountain sweet shrub, produces a profusion of dry fig-like pods at fruiting time.

All parts of the sweetshrub plant are aromatic to some degree, bark, leaves and flowers. Some writers liken the smell to camphor, some to strawberries and some just to a general spiciness. In any case, it is considered a pleasant scent and the shrub is frequently cultivated, both here and in the north where it is not hardy in the wild. In looking (unsuccessfully) for legends connected with sweetshrub, I came across the attractive suggestion that the young southern girl of some years ago, faced with a morning in church, might steal out and break off a twig of calycanthus to hide in her handkerchief. The pleasant smell of this, crushed between her fingers in pocket or reticule, would help to while away the long moments of a tedious sermon. It sounds like a good idea, and somehow less reprehensible than paper airplanes and some of the other distractions which children employ nowadays!

The California species of Calycanthus, C. occidentalis, is quite similar to C. floridus except that the leaves are larger and the flowers are a brighter red. It, too, is very spicy smelling and a favorite shrub for cultivation.

Calycanthus seems to be a ‘leisurely’ shrub. It takes a long time to do anything. It is slow to germinate and grows at an unhurried rate to maturity. Then each year it has a long flowering period which is our bonus in the life cycle. You can find sweetshrub in bloom from April until August, and after this the fruits may remain on the tree for several months.