

Bottlebrush buckeye is picturesque in the landscape

When I saw a thicket of bottlebrush buckeye for the first time at The Planter's Palette about fifteen years ago, it quickly moved to the top of my must-have plant list. It wasn't long before a small specimen was planted in a spot shaded by tall trees in my landscape. Today, that one plant has spread into an impressive colony.

Bottlebrush buckeye, botanically named *Aesculus parviflora*, is native to Alabama, Georgia and northern Florida but is hardy at least as far north as Zone 5. It gets its common name from its large and showy bottlebrush-like flowers and pear-shaped nuts that resemble buckeyes.

Aesculus parviflora is not a shrub for small gardens or impatient gardeners. It grows tall – at least six to ten feet – and broad, spreading slowly by suckers as wide as it grows tall. In natural settings it grows as an understory shrub, enjoying the shade of woodland trees, but it is quite adaptable to a wide range of locations and can be grown in full sun to part shade.

Bottlebrush buckeye is best planted in moist, well-drained soil that has been amended with lots of organic matter. It is not fussy about the pH of soil and grows in both acidic and alkaline soils. Experts report bottlebrush buckeye cannot tolerate dry soil. Although I kept the soil slightly moist while it was settling in to my garden many years ago, I have not done any supplemental watering as long as I can remember.

Bottlebrush buckeye boasts large, dark green, palmate leaves (divided into five to seven leaflets) that turn bright yellow in fall. Large – up to twelve inches long – panicles of tubular white flowers bloom beginning in June and continuing into July. Spectacular in the landscape, they are not only attractive to gardeners but also to butterflies, bees and other pollinators. Seeds enclosed in thick husks follow spent flowers. Chipmunks and squirrels may find them delicious, but they are toxic to humans.

It is easy to propagate bottlebrush buckeye. In fall, cut suckers with roots attached from the mother plant and re-plant. Or collect seeds as their husks open and plant them – before they dry out – about an inch deep in the garden or in pots filled with soilless potting mix. They will sprout the following spring but won't flower for a few years.

I have never needed to do any pruning on my bottlebrush buckeye, but if it does require trimming it should be done right after flowering.

Utilize bottlebrush buckeye in large shrub borders or as a specimen plant in the landscape. They are especially useful in areas where deer and rabbits are frequent visitors because they are not their preferred cuisine.

There is a later-blooming variety of *Aesculus parviflora* named 'Rogers' that grows a bit larger, sports even larger flowers, and blooms a couple of weeks later than the species.

Maybe it is its large size or perhaps it is its slow growth rate that makes gardeners think twice before planting bottlebrush buckeye in their gardens. I couldn't be happier I planted that small plant more than ten years ago. It has become a picturesque part of my landscape.

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