

Big Tree for April 2009

Amelanchier Canadensis, (Juneberry or Serviceberry)

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Look along NH roadsides in April for the first spring blossoms that pop open on shrubs and trees of the amelanchier family: shadbush, shadblow, serviceberry or Juneberry. The white blossoms open just as the leaves are unfolding, so they appear to be growing on dead branches. The flower's five petals are long and floppy, with a cluster of long stamens and pistil in the center that are pollinated by early spring bees. The effect is like a white cloud of blossoms that seems to float in thickets or along woodland edges.

Both the shrub and the tree form grow in NH. The many forms of the species confuse even experts who can't agree whether there are many different species, or many natural hybrids. No two books agree or provide consistent information. So last spring I was determined to figure out for myself the difference between the blossoms of the shrub form and those of the tree. I just became more confused. But in the process I discovered amelanchier shrubs and trees everywhere. I carried my camera with me and found taller and bigger tree forms as I learned to look higher and higher in the

roadside thickets for blossoms.

The ultimate coincidence occurred the day I took my car in to the garage in early May for its annual servicing. When I went to get it, I was told to find it in the back lot. It was a glorious spring day and I marveled at a small pin cherry tree in the overgrown field behind, that was literally bent over with the weight of blossoms. Then I happened to glance up and saw more blossoms at the very top of the grove of trees growing along the Souhegan River. Of course there was no way to reach these blossoms to inspect closely. But I had my camera. None of the surrounding trees had leafed out, so blossoms were really like a white cloud at the very top of the tree canopy. The trunks of the two trees with the blossoms looked nothing like cherry bark, so I was confident that these were amelanchier trees.

I quickly rounded up the Big Tree team for Hillsborough County, but in just the few days that passed before we returned, the blossoms were already hidden by the unfurling leaves of the surrounding trees. But we were able to find the top of our biggest amelanchier tree and get the Big Tree measurements: height, diameter of the trunk 4' from the ground, and average crown spread. It would have been impossible to do this later after the forest was fully leafed out as the trees tops were too high to see one tree from another. What luck to have a car due for inspection in May, as this new New Hampshire champion Amelanchier arborea tree would never have been discovered. This NH champion serviceberry tree is 78 feet tall – a giant for the species! The biggest trunk was 31 inches around. When young, the bark is smooth and grey, becomes striped with age, and finally develops longitudinal furrows.

The American Forests organization that sponsors the Big Tree program only lists measurements for Downy Serviceberry, Amelanchier arborea, although other botanists describe some other species like *A. Canadensis* as small trees.

Years ago when the native plant and shrubs became fashionable for home gardening and landscaping, I bought a bunch of little amelanchier sprouts to raise. Most didn't amount to much, but the one I planted next to the garage and front walk took off. It loves its location and definitely wants to be a tree rather than a shrub. But it is in the wrong location – it hangs over the walk and I have it propped up with a big stick. I love the stringy white blossoms in late

April, and it has pretty berries in June and nice fall color, so we may have to eventually move the brick walk. But it will be stunning when it is 78 feet tall! Its grey bark is beginning to show the typical lengthwise stripes. With the snow just melting I can see that its buds are already swelling. Buds are another important clue in tree identification and the buds on my big shrub/tree are big, pointed and reddish/pinkish, while the buds on the little shrubby serviceberry plants are half the size and not as upward pointing. (I began my observations too late last year to see this difference.) A gardening friend who grew up in NH explained the story behind the name serviceberry - it blooms when the ground thaws and spring burials take place. The flowers are cut for the service. For this reason it is planted in cemeteries. Its 'clock' function is also the reason for the name shadbush – it blooms when the shad run up the rivers. Its fruit ripens in June; the reason for the name Juneberry.

The blue fruits that resemble small crab apples with multiple small seeds are very high in vitamin C and other nutrients. Birds seem to know this and gobble up the treats as soon as they ripen. Native Americans discovered the nutritive value of the fruit and used the berries in making pemmican, a dried food made from pounded dried meat combined with fat and the dried fruits. It was eaten in winter and on long land voyages and saved many populations from the horrors of scurvy. Saskatoon pie is made with the berries and is a renowned delicacy in western Canada where the shrubs are called Saskatoon bushes.

Hopefully, this year I will remember to look for the fruits before wildlife consume them all. They make stains, so I doubt I will be inspired to get into the mess of making preserves from them. Other than its value as food for wildlife and people, and its use in natural landscapes, serviceberry wood has no particular use.

If you notice a giant serviceberry tree this spring, estimate its height and measure the trunk to compare to the champion trees for the counties of NH. To see the NH Big Tree list and to learn more about the NH Big Tree program, go to: <http://extension.unh.edu/forestry/BigTree.htm>, or NHBigTree.org.

The UNH Cooperative Extension and the NH Division of Forests and Lands sponsor the NH Big Tree program in cooperation with the National Register of Big Trees through American Forests.

