

# CHICAGOLAND GROWS<sup>®</sup>, INC.

*Plant Introduction Program - Plant Release Bulletin #28*



## **Morton Virginia Sweetspire – Scarlet Beauty™**

*Itea virginica* 'Morton'

The Morton Virginia sweetspire is a summer-flowering shrub with excellent fall color. This selection has superior hardiness and a higher soil pH tolerance than other cultivars of the species. An easy-to-grow native shrub selected from the collections at The Morton Arboretum.



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# Morton Virginia Sweetspire – Scarlet Beauty™

*Itea virginica* 'Morton'

## Botanical Name

*Itea virginica* 'Morton'

## Common Name

Morton Virginia Sweetspire

## Family

Iteaceae

## Origin

Selected in 1999 by Kris Bachtell of The Morton Arboretum, Lisle, Illinois, from a plant that has been in the Arboretum's collection since the late 1950s. The species is native throughout the southeastern United States, from coastal Florida north to New Jersey and from eastern Texas north into southern Illinois. It typically inhabits moist to wet soils along swamps, lakes, and river edges in shade to sun.

## Hardiness

USDA Zones 4-9. Hardiness for 'Morton' has been proven to -25 °F in a laboratory situation. Partial winter tip dieback is the extent of any winter injury observed over a lengthy trial period at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Therefore, it can be grown safely in USDA Zone 4, unlike most other sweetspire selections, which are reliably hardy only to USDA Zones 5 or 6.

## Bloom Season

This selection blooms for three weeks from mid-June to early July in northern Illinois (USDA Zone 5).

## Plant Habit

A multistemmed shrub with initially upright branches that arch slightly with age. Spreads by suckers over time to eventually form an open thicket.

## Size

Mature plants are broad-rounded and measure about 3 to 4 feet tall and 4 feet wide in five years. Slowly spreads wider from suckers.

## Growth Rate

A moderate growth rate, both stems and suckers.

## Ornamental Characteristics

The white flowers are densely borne on numerous pendant 3-inch-long inflorescences that are produced from mid-June to early July, when few other shrubs are in bloom. The flowers have a faint but pleasing fragrance and are attractive to butterflies. Medium-green foliage all summer changes to deep orange-red to red-purple in autumn, peaking in early November and persisting through a very hard frost. In milder climates, the colorful foliage can persist much of the winter. The stems can also turn a pleasing red color during winter months.

## Culture

Best grown on moist to wet soils with ample organic matter. As with most selections of Virginia sweetspire, 'Morton' prefers an acidic soil, but is tolerant of and will out-perform (notably a lack of leaf chlorosis) most other selections when grown on neutral to alkaline soils. Foliage chlorosis on this selection is more often an indicator the site is too dry or of drought than of a high pH intolerance. Best for partial shade, but will tolerate full sun with an adequate moisture supply. It will also persist in deep shade but will be leggier and not as floriferous.

## Pest and Disease Problems

No known pests or diseases. May exhibit some leaf chlorosis in high pH soils that are also dry, but much less severe of a problem than for other sweetspire selections. Moderate deer browse.

## Landscape Value

'Morton' is a beautiful selection of a native shrub that is cultivated for its summer bloom, its beautiful red fall foliage, and its shade and moist soil adaptability. More tolerant than other sweetspire selections to the alkaline soils common to much of the Midwest. Grow as a specimen plant or mass on moist banks for soil stabilization. Utilize on moist soils along ponds and waterways, at the edge of woodland gardens, under landscape trees, and in the mixed shaded border. Place where both the summer flowers and autumn foliage color can be appreciated.

## Propagation

Easy to root from shoot-tip cuttings taken year-round. The underground suckers can also be lifted and divided.

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The Chicagoland Grows® Plant Introduction Program is dedicated to the evaluation, selection, production, and marketing of recommended and new plant cultivars. Plants selected for the program have proven to be adaptable to the Midwest and are made available to the commercial and retail landscape industry through an international network of growers and propagators.

