

Serviceberry

by Sally Cureton

The very first tree to display its blossoms each year on Massanutten Mountain is one that is very easy to miss. Downy Serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*) is a small deciduous tree that produces lovely delicate white flowers. Serviceberry is a member of the Rose family along with hawthorns, plums, cherries and mountain ashes. A slow growing tree, it is native to the northeastern United States. There are about 30 species of this genus. Serviceberry is known by several other names including Shadbush, Juneberry and Saskatoon. Shadbush was the name given it by colonial fishermen who noted that it bloomed about the time each year that the shad fish began their spawning runs. Those blooms also coincided with the time when burial services could be held for those that had died over the winter months. It was the first opportunity a minister had in the spring to get to some settlements.

Downy Serviceberry will eventually grow to about 25-40 feet tall. The flowers grow in drooping clusters at the end of the branches. The showy flowers do not last long - usually about a week. In the fall the leaves turn a colorful yellow-orange to red. One of the biggest secrets of the forest is the little purple berries that this tree produces each year. They ripen in June and taste very much like a blueberry. As a result they are a favorite of birds such as goldfinch, chickadees, cardinals and robins. The berries can be used to make jellies, cobblers, pies, etc.

Downy Serviceberry leaves are elliptical (oval) shaped, about 2-4 inches long. The tree bark is a smooth gray. The tree will grow in full sun to partial shade and will tolerate rocky soils. If you look along side many of the roads in Massanutten Village in early spring, these trees are there, doing their best to cheer us up after a long winter, especially this one.