

38



Wax myrtle fruit

Photo Credit: Ellen Honeycutt

Native Plant Highlight: Wax Myrtle

morella cerifera

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Having lived in the Georgia Piedmont for most of my life, I was familiar with southern wax myrtle as a specimen species or a hedge occasionally used in formal public landscapes. Rarely could I walk past one of these planted parking lot beauties without plucking and crunching some of the aromatic leaves or stripping a limb of a few frosty grey-blue berries to squish and smell on my walk.

Also known as bayberry or southern wax myrtle, its native range stretches from southern New Jersey through much of the coastal plain west to Texas. While it has been introduced beyond its native range, southern wax myrtle (*Morella cerifera*) is most at home in the sandy soils of the coastal plain, and especially on the Georgia coast where I moved this past year.

Here, I now see it in more forms and in more habitats than I would have ever imagined – in freshwater swamps, on dry upland forests, in brackish marsh, delineating boundaries between property lines and untamed forests, and domesticated in more formal gardens and landscapes. It is the most common shrub in longleaf pine-slash pine communities, and it

maintains its role as a parking lot tree in its home range, as well.

General Description

Wax myrtle can take the shape of a single-to-many-stemmed shrub or small tree, typically around 10 to 20 feet tall. The bark is smooth and light gray, often covered with lichens, and the multiple stems twist and arc, creating shrubby cover from the ground up. Its form is highly variable and can be influenced by site characteristics or strategic pruning.



As screening along driveway
Photo Credit: Erin Cork

Leaves are glossy yellow-green to olive green and are evergreen, with the duller leaves of last year

(continued on page 40)

Southern SOIL

(continued from page 39)

joined by new, brighter and glossier growth which emerges in early spring. Small chartreuse flowers on both male and female plants bloom as early as March and April, followed by clusters of blue-grey berries which appear in late summer and persist through winter.



Wax myrtle as a formal hedge

Photo Credit: William King

40 ♀

Wildlife Value

While not all birds can digest the waxy coated fruits, wax myrtle's berries are an important winter food source for many species, including the yellow-rumped warbler, kinglets, bobwhite quail, and wild turkey. The plant's natural growth habit is less dense than many shrubs, and its more open foliage allows filtered light to reach the ground, providing excellent cover, perches, and nesting sites for many small birds.

Wax myrtle is a host plant for the red-banded hairstreak butterfly, and it is a plant often used by some of our impressive silk moth species. Scanning the foliage at night with a flashlight is the best way to find cocoons or emerging silk moth species of Polyphemus moths, luna moths, and other large silk moth species. When permitted to

grow in its wild, shrubby form, wax myrtle provides excellent cover for birds, rabbits, turtles, and other small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

In the Garden

Wax myrtle is often used as a screening hedge and is an excellent substitute for some of the more commonly planted exotic invasive plant species, such as Asian privets (*Ligustrum* species) or Autumn olive (*Eleagnus* species).

With its more open structure (particularly when planted in more shaded areas), it can be used on its own as a natural or sculpted hedge, as a part of a mixed hedge, or as a backdrop along borders. Some pruning of lower limbs may be necessary to allow more diminutive shrubs or wildflowers to fill in the gaps. The light shade of wax myrtle and its tendency to grow arcing stems makes it a good pondside planting, but it could also be pruned to accommodate a bird bath or other small water feature.



Wax myrtle flowering.

Photo Credit: Erin Cork

The waxy coating of the berries was once used to make bayberry candles, and the aromatic oils found

in the stems and the leaves of the plant make wax myrtle quite flammable. Like pine straw, hollies, and other flammable plants and materials, wax myrtle should be planted at least 30 feet away from wooden structures, including fences or decks.

General Care

Wax myrtle will thrive in full sun when allowed to adhere to its natural growth habit, but healthy individuals are also found in part shade and in more interior, shaded forests. Wax myrtle can be limbed up to remove lower branches for a tree-like stature or sheared to achieve a more uniform shape if desired. Mowing along the edge or planting in mulched beds can keep any thicketing tendencies in check. Wax myrtle are hardy plants and can endure tough conditions, including drought, salt, strong winds, periodic flooding, and deer herbivory. Cold hardy for USDA Zones 7-10.

Availability

At some nurseries, you may find that only female wax myrtle plants are available – these are the plants that are most often desired for their blue-grey berries. Both male and female plants will produce dense clusters of chartreuse flowers in late winter/early spring, but both male and female plants are required for fertilization each year. A



41

Silk moth cocoon on wax myrtle

Photo Credit: Erin Cork

related species, dwarf wax myrtle (*Morella pumila*), is also commonly available at nurseries. While it is more rarely observed in natural plant communities, this plant is often incorporated into landscaping where its smaller stature is desired. 

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