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Palmetto



Meadows for Home Landscapes • Urban Trees • Native Passionflowers

Wax Myrtle (*Morella cerifera*)

Article and photos by Ginny Stibolt

Wax myrtle (*Morella cerifera*) is an easy-to-grow evergreen shrub or small tree that typically grows to 10-15' tall and 8-10' wide, but sometimes to 20' tall or more. It's native to all of Florida, even the Florida Keys, and naturally occurs in a variety of habitats including edges of wetlands, river margins, sand dunes, pine barrens, hillsides, and upland forests. The specific epithet *cerifera* means wax-bearing.

This species is dioecious – male and female flowers are borne in catkins on separate plants. At least one male plant is needed in the neighborhood to facilitate pollination of the female flowers, but female plants are preferred in the landscape because they produce fruit eaten by birds, particularly birds that are migrating during the winter.

Like many members of the myrtle family Myricaceae, both the leaves and the fruit are aromatic. The glossy leaves are 3-5" long and are dotted with tiny yellow resin glands. Leaves, particularly the new growth, emit a distinctive bayberry fragrance when crushed. The fragrant flowers are not showy, but the flowers on male plants, dull yellow catkins about 1" long, are easily seen. Flowers bloom in late winter and pollinated female flowers develop to become blue-gray fruits (drupes) in late summer to fall, with persistence through winter. Each fruit has an aromatic, waxy coating.

This shrub is similar to southern bayberry (*M. caroliniensis*), which is native to the Florida Panhandle and some counties in north and central Florida. The scentless bayberry (*M. inodora*) is native to the Florida Panhandle. There is a dwarf wax myrtle variety that only grows to about six feet tall that is sometimes



Wax myrtles play a number of important roles in the local ecosystem from enriching the soil through nitrogen fixation to being a larval food source for some hairstreak butterflies.

separated out as a different species (*M. pusilla*). The northern bayberry (*M. pensylvanica*) is native from the Carolinas north to Canada and is the traditional source of bayberry candle wax.

In the landscape

Wax myrtle is a fast-growing, versatile shrub or small tree that can be grown in full sun or partial shade. It's tolerant of drought, wind, salt, flood and fire, and is deer resistant. It also tolerates poor soils because it fixes nitrogen in a symbiotic relationship with an actinomycetes bacteria at twice the rate of a typical legume. It will grow in a wide range of soil conditions ranging from acidic to alkaline and from the edges of wet areas to dry xeric uplands. It tends to sucker and in some cases the suckers can form at some distance from the mother plant.

The evergreen habit of these shrubs means they are a good choice for screening on their own or mixed with other shrubs and they can be trimmed if necessary. Because of their quick growth and suckering habit, the screening becomes dense in only a few years. A wax myrtle screen offers good cover and food for wildlife. In addition to the fruit for winter birds, it is the larval food source for the banded hairstreak (*Satyrium calanus*) and the red-banded hairstreak (*Calycopis cecrops*) butterflies.

Wax myrtles are an excellent choice for large rain gardens, bioswales or the edges of seasonal retention ponds. Unlike other climates, Florida's rain garden plants need to be both flood and drought tolerant because of our seven-month dry season.

Wax myrtles can be used as an understory shrub at the edges of wooded areas and as part of groves built around



The fast-growing, evergreen wax myrtle can serve as a dense, low-maintenance screening in the landscape in full sun or partial shade and in damp or dry areas.

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The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society

is to preserve, conserve and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

Official definition of native plant:

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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Features

4 Meadows for Home Landscapes: More Than Just Wildflowers

The zeal to use native wildflowers to create pollinator gardens falls far short of meeting the maximum value that a pollinator garden is capable of providing. Learn how adding native grasses increases the diversity of plants and pollinators. *Article and photos by Craig Huegel.*

8 Rethinking Florida's Urban Trees

Florida's natural tree populations have been vastly reduced as more and more people have settled here. In suburban communities new trees have been planted at much lower densities than the original populations. In urban areas, tree density is even lower, but urban trees provide a number of important benefits. *Article and photos by Ginny Stibolt.*

12 The Native Passionflowers of Florida

There are six native members of the genus *Passiflora* in Florida. Two of the most common species are popular among gardeners because of their availability, but especially because they serve as larval host plants for a variety of butterflies. *Article and photos by Roger L. Hammer.*

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Editorial Content

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

ON THE COVER: *Passiflora pallens*. This endangered passionflower is found in Broward, Miami-Dade, Collier, and mainland Monroe Counties in Florida. It grows along forest margins and in canopy gaps. Photo by Roger L. Hammer.

allowed to climb trees like it does in nature, even though John Vanderplank, in his book *Passion Flowers* (2000) writes, “It has little value as an ornamental pot plant or garden plant.” We lovers of Florida native plants would respectfully disagree. The sepals are green with very narrow greenish yellow petals, and the yellow filaments are green or white basally.

So, whether you grow Florida’s native passionflowers for their compelling blossoms, or to attract songbirds and butterflies, they are certain to add charm and beauty to your home garden.

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Vanderplank, J. 2000. *Passion Flowers*, 3rd Edition. Cambridge, MA. The MIT Press.

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Natives For Home Landscapes: Wax Myrtle

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stand-alone trees in the landscape. Their ability to fix nitrogen improves the soil for the whole area.

In natural areas, wax myrtles grow back quickly after fires and occur naturally in fire-prone habitats. But, in the home landscape, these shrubs are potential fire hazards because the leaves, stems and branches contain flammable aromatic compounds, so do not plant them in areas near fire pits or barbecue sites. In fire-wise landscapes, keep these shrubs at least 30 feet away from buildings.

Wax myrtles are readily available from Florida Association of Native Nurseries (FANN) members. You can find native nurseries that have this plant in stock or find a native nursery near you at www.plantrealflorida.org.

After planting this shrub, provide constant moisture for several weeks or longer in the dry season. Once established, it requires no additional irrigation and no other general maintenance except to trim it back if necessary. Wax myrtles are a great addition to your Florida native yard. Let’s make native plants the new normal in Florida.

For more information:

Visit the USDA & US Forest Service Fire Effects Information System page on *Morella cerifera*: www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/morcer/all.html

About the Author:

Ginny Stibolt is a botanist, native plant enthusiast, and an award-winning garden writer. She’s coauthor of *Climate-Wise Landscaping: Practical Actions for a Sustainable Future* (www.climatewiselandscaping.com) and author or coauthor of four Florida gardening books published by the University Press of Florida. Ginny’s blog is www.greengardeningmatters.com.