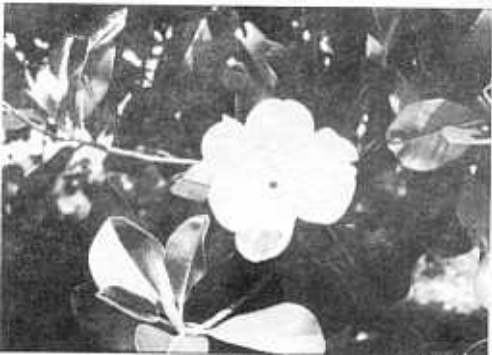
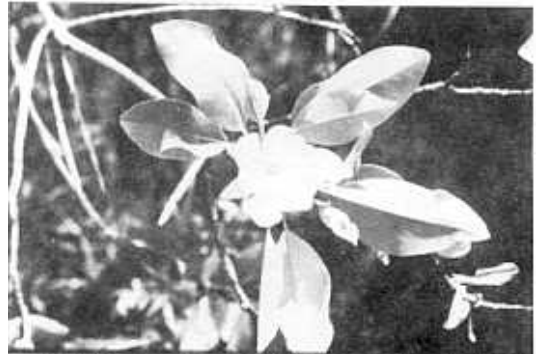


AMERICAN BAYS

by Daniel F. Austin



Bull Bay



Sweet Bay

Anyone who comes to the southeastern United States from elsewhere in the country encounters a series of plants known as “bays”. This seems curious to people from landlocked and coastal areas where “bays” are inlets of the sea or other bodies of water.

When we learn the common names of plants in our area, we discover that they include the red bay, sweet bay, swamp bay, loblolly bay, bay cedar, and bayberry. If we study the plant communities we learn that there are forests called bays, or bay heads. Another plant, the dahoon holly, is lumped along with the bays in bay heads.

How did these terms come to be used in this manner? Is there any relation to bays of waterways?

To answer the second question first, there is no historical relation between the use for the plants and the geographical land form. Bay, as a land form, dates from the 14th century Middle French word, *baie*, and has always referred to the land form associated with an inlet.

The second meaning and derivation came originally from the Latin word “*bacca*”, or berry, and dates from the 15th century. In this sense the word originally referred to the fruit of the European laurel or *Laurus nobilis*. The Latin *bacca* was altered into *baie* in Middle French and *bay* in Middle English. The Latin, French, and English meanings are the same: all mean berry, and originally referred specifically to the fruits or berries (technically, “drupes”) of the Old World laurel that is renowned in classical literature as a garland or crown given as a prize for victory or excellence.



Loblolly Bay

As with other words adapted into English from different languages, similar spellings may have different meanings. Hence, a bay is not always a bay. Indeed, Webster's dictionary lists five meanings as a noun, one as a verb, and another as an adjective.

Our particular plants were foreign to the European visitors and settlers when they came to this part of the world. As all people do, these Europeans compared the plants they found with things they knew from home. They were familiar with the bay trees (*Laurus* from Europe, but were not familiar with several New World plant genera such as *Gordonia*, *Magnolia*, and *Myrica*. They did know the genus *Ilex*, but their species was so different from some of ours that they had difficulty in making the connection.

When these Europeans arrived, they called the new plants names which compared them with things they knew at home. Thus the red bay (*Persea borbonia*), the sweet bay or swamp bay (*Magnolia virginiana*), bull bay (*Magnolia grandiflora*), loblolly bay (*Gordonia*

lasianthus), and bayberry (*Myrica cerifera*) came into existence as common names.

Bay cedar (*Suriana maritima*), of course, grows near waterside bays, and was named for the land form word of French origin. Cedar in this common name has nothing to do with appearance, but with the odor of the crushed leaves, which resembles that of a true

yaupon—from the language of the coastal Carolina Indians (Algonquin language stock).

dahoon—presumably from an Indian language; first used by Mark Catesby about 1728.

cassine (variants include *cacina*, *guahi*, *cassina*, *cassiney*, *yahola*, *esta hoola*, *cazina*, *assi*, or *assin*)—from the Muskogean languages. Osceola, the Seminole war leader, took his English name from a mispronunciation and misspelling of his title in Muskogee: “Asi Yahola”, or “Black Drink Singer”.



Red Bay

cedar (*Cedrus*) or juniper (*Juniperus*).

In plant communities, bays are also called bay heads. The plants typical of these swamp forest associations are mostly red bay, sweet bay, loblolly bay, and dahoon holly. The physical resemblance of the red bay with the sweet bay and loblolly bay is obvious. Even without too much trouble most of us can see a similarity with the bayberry.



Bayberry

Dahoon holly also looks like the others and has berries, so it may be included without too much stretching of the imagination into things called bays. Why then, does it not have a common name like the others? Dahoon holly and a species with which the Europeans confused it, the yaupon holly, are plants that strongly impressed the newcomers to the New World.

Scientifically, we have now straightened out the hopelessly confusing use

of names associated for centuries with these plants, so that the dahoon is *Ilex cassine*, and yaupon is *Ilex vomitoria*. Dahoon, yaupon, and cassine are apparently based on American Indian words. Because the American Indians had been using holly for thousands of years to brew a beverage for both daily and ceremonial consumption, the plants were common in their lives. Europeans found these items used regularly all over what is now the southeastern United States, and were particularly impressed by certain ceremonial uses. Yaupon leaves were and are used to brew a beverage that came to be called "black drink" by the Europeans. Because of emesis associated with drinking this beverage in ceremonials, Linnaeus applied the name *Ilex vomitoria*, and non-scientific literature of the first few centuries of European and American Indian history contain numerous descriptions of the drink's use. Since an array of American names were available for this frequent item in the Indian larder, the Europeans adopted native names. There was no need to make a comparison with plants the Europeans knew at home because *Ilex vomitoria* already had common names that they learned from the Indians.

Dr. Daniel F. Austin is a professor in the Department of Biological Sciences, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton.