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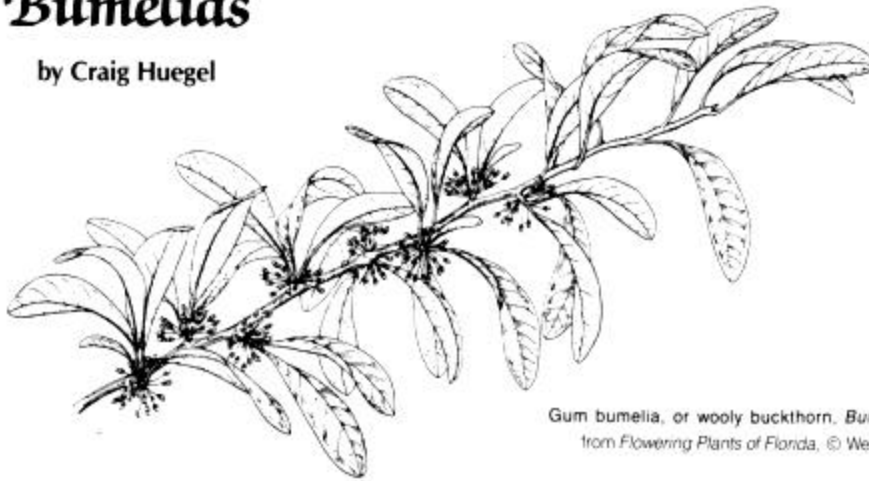
# The Palmetto

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## Bumelias

by Craig Huegel



Gum bumelia, or woolly buckthorn, *Bumelia lanuginosa*  
from *Flowering Plants of Florida*, © Wendy B. Zornieker, 1989

Florida has a wealth of interesting and useful native flora that are, sadly, under-used or never used in “civilized” landscapes in the places where we live. The use of native plants often is marred by the same lack of imagination that accompanies the use of non-natives.

If this was simply an error in aesthetics it would not be so grave a problem, but the effects are farther reaching. Landscape design influences many other things including the numbers and types of wildlife that will be supported by the system. For example, gray squirrels and blue jays are common largely because of our frequent use of live oaks and laurel oaks. A greater diversity of wildlife will occur once we diversify our use of native plants to include species that are now infrequently used, but which provide important wildlife values. Many native plants meet these criteria.

The focus of this article, however, is to highlight one genus – the bumelias.

Bumelias (*Bumelia* spp) are a diverse group of trees and shrubs that are used infrequently in “civilized” landscapes. Known also as buckthorns, they should not be confused with the buckthorns in the Rhamnaceae family – especially *Rhamnus* spp. buckthorns. These two groups are not related, and serve as yet another example of the need to use scientific names. Bumelias belong to the sapodilla family (Sapotaceae). This includes a number of excellent wildlife plants including some south Florida species such as wild dilly (*Manilkara bahamensis*), willow bustic (*Dipholis salicifolia*), and mastic (*Mastichodendron foetidissimum*) that are not in the genus *Bumelia*.

Depending on the taxonomist that you believe, at least seven species of bumelias are native to Florida. Most of these can

be grown in many areas of the state, depending on the conditions of your growing site. Some species are adaptable, while others have specific requirements and are unforgiving if planted in the wrong place. But because few bumelia species are used in landscape design, there is much that we could learn about their limits.

Bumelias share several characteristics, although this is a diverse group. They all produce milky sap. All of them have simple leaves without pokes or teeth and the leaves are alternate along the stem. For the most part, leaves also are rather small, dark green, and rounded to elliptical in shape, and are tardily deciduous – meaning that they drop their leaves in late winter and leaf out again shortly thereafter. Like the hawthorns, most bumelias develop a branching pattern that shows “character” – they are irregular and crooked. Most also have thorns, although the thorns are not hooked or overly nasty.

*Bumelia* flowers are small, and white to greenish-white in color. They would not win any beauty contests, but some species are attractive in flower and some also are quite aromatic. Most species attract a wide diversity of pollinators. *Bumelia* flowers also are structurally perfect – meaning that the flowers have both male and female parts and can pollinate themselves. Therefore, they can produce fruit without a companion nearby. The fruit is dark purple, egg-shaped, and juicy. In most species, fruit crops are heavy each year.

Because of these characteristics, bumelias are an excellent wildlife plant, especially useful to many songbirds. Their branching pattern combined with their thorny nature make them ideal cover. The nature of their fruit also makes them great at providing food.

Despite all of these qualities, bumelias are essentially a forgotten landscaping plant and are seldom grown by the nursery trade. A few species have limited availability from some native plant nurseries, but for even these you may have to hunt around a bit to find them in stock. The following are brief descriptions of the individual species.

***Bumelia anomala***. this species, without a common name is perhaps one of the rarest native plants in Florida, yet it is not currently listed or even proposed for listing as a protected species. It occurs as scattered individuals around the Gainesville, area, and in a few other localities in northeastern and central Florida. This species is so poorly known that its range likely has not been truly mapped. *Bumelia anomala* grows to about nine feet and occurs in mesic hammocks. The leaves are densely silvery-pubescent underneath.

***Bumelia celastrina***. Commonly known as saffron plum, this species is a south Florida bumelia that occurs naturally as far north as Pinellas County. It will suffer damage from prolonged or very cold temperatures. This is primarily a coastal hammock tree, but from my experience it tolerates a variety of soil and sun conditions. It also is salt-tolerant. Saffron plum reaches 15 to 20 feet in height. The dark, furrowed bark is attractive, the flowers, which open in late winter, are greenish-white and very aromatic, and attract a great many pollinators.

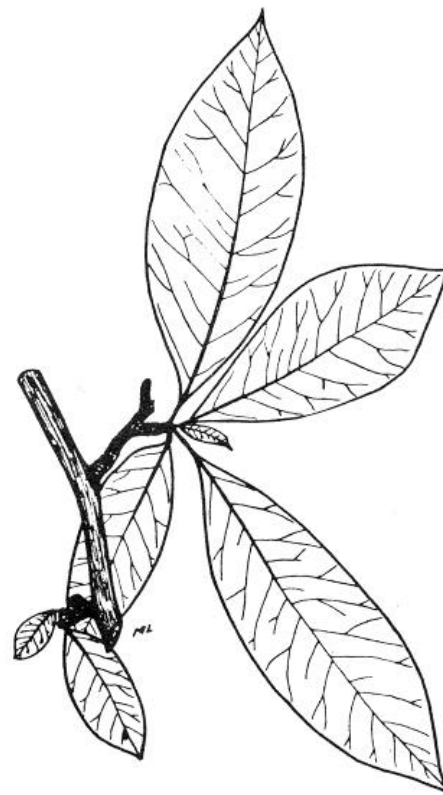
Another positive feature is the fruit. The “plums” are ½ to 1 inch long and quite sweet. Even without consideration for the birds, you might wish to grow this tree for your own eating. This bumelia is one of south Florida’s best food and cover trees for birds and should be considered by everyone fortunate enough to be living in the right place to grow it.

***Bumelia lanuginosa***. Gum bumelia, or wooly buckthorn, is an understory tree that rarely exceeds 30 feet in height. This tree occurs in a variety of upland sandy habitats throughout northern and central Florida, although it is not a conspicuous part of the flora in any system. Its common names come from two of its features: its twigs exude a white gummy sap when they are wounded, and the undersides of its leaves are densely covered with coppery hairs. The coppery color is especially attractive and noticeable when a light breeze blows through its branches. The bark also is attractive, as it is dark, and furrowed with flaky, reddish-brown scales.

***Bumelia lycioides***. Buckthorn bumelia is a relatively rare, shrubby tree in Florida, listed as a threatened species here, but more common farther north. This bumelia inhabits bottomland hardwood forests and nearby slopes. It will tolerate flooding for brief durations, but not for extended periods. Buckthorn bumelia has rather elongated leaves that come to a noticeable point. There is no pubescence (hairs) on the stems or leaves, except on the very young growth. The fruit are small, but not quite as small as those of the wooly buckthorn. And like that species, it begins to produce fruit at an extremely early age. Buckthorn bumelia is not being grown commercially in Florida, but it is available from some out-of-

state vendors. I have not had a lot of experience with it, so I would recommend that its use be restricted to sites where it can be closely observed.

***Bumelia reclinata***. Smooth bumelia is a variable plant that occurs both on mesic hammock slopes and in wet depressions throughout north and central Florida. In most instances, it is associated with limestone soils. This is a shrub that reaches about 15 feet in height. Its numerous stems generally are quite crooked and it tends to not have much of a spread. Leaf shape is varied, but most are rather elliptical. The whitish flowers are abundant along the stem. These are followed by numerous small sweet fruit. Because of its adaptability and its tolerance of alkaline soils, it has much potential for use in developed landscapes.



Buckthorn bumelia, *Bumelia lycioides*

from *Trees of Northern Florida*, by Kurz & Godfrey, © 1962

***Bumelia rufotomentosa***. Rusty bumelia is a low multi-branching shrub that is named for the tendency of its new growth to be densely covered by rusty-red hairs. Although some taxonomists consider this to be a subspecies of smooth bumelia, its growth habit and habitat preferences make it distinct. Rusty bumelia frequently grows as a clone – producing many stems from underground runners. It rarely stands more than a few feet high, thus growing more like a ground cover than a shrub. Although the new stem growth is pubescent, the leaves do not share this trait.

This species also produces fruits that are slightly larger than those of smooth bumelia. The distribution of this species has not been well-described, but it is found in a variety of

counties in north and central Florida, always in sandy, xeric habitats.

***Bumelia tenax***. Silver buckthorn, or tough bumelia, is a species distributed nearly statewide in coastal and interior scrub and other xeric habitats. It often occurs as a spiny, twisted shrub, but it may become a small tree up to 20 feet tall. I have seen both forms growing side-by-side in the same location. Young stems, petioles, and the undersides of leaf surfaces are densely covered by rusty or coppery-colored hairs, although the amount of pubescence varies greatly. In well-pubescent specimens, this copper color is noticeable from some distance and increases its value as a landscape plant. The amount of pubescence also changes to some extent throughout the year and seems often to increase during the heat of the summer.

Of all the bumelias native to Florida, this is the one most widely grown by native plant nurseries and is the easiest to locate. Silver buckthorn, as a tree, is one of the finest native plants for providing food and cover for wildlife. As a shrub, its value is reduced somewhat for nesting birds, but it remains an invaluable wildlife plant, especially when used as a component of a xeric community landscape.

Look for one or more of these bumelias species at native nurseries to include in the plantings when planning a new landscape or adding to your established landscape.

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