

Wax Myrtle

Wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) is native to South Carolina and other southeastern States.

Mature Height/Spread

This broadleaf evergreen shrub or tree grows quickly to 15 to 20 feet high and wide. The leaves are glossy green and typically 1½ to 3 inches long and ⅓ to ¾ inches wide, sometimes bigger (4½ inches long and 2 inches wide). Inconspicuous flowers appear in early spring, followed by fruit in late summer through winter. The grayish-white fruits are small (⅛ inch wide), heavily coated with wax and massed in clusters on the stems of the previous season's growth. Wax myrtle plants are either male or female. Only female plants bear berries.



Waxy gray berries of wax myrtle.
Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Growth Rate

Wax myrtle grows very fast, sometimes as much as 5 feet in height and width in a single growing season.

Landscape Use

Wax myrtles are useful as screen plants, informal hedges, or roadside plantings. The foliage and berries are pleasantly aromatic. Birds are attracted to wax myrtles, which they use for food and shelter. The waxy berries were used for making candles in Colonial times.

Wax myrtles make good beach plants, since they tolerate drought, sand, sun and salt spray.



Wax myrtle growing as a hedge in a beach community.
Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Cultivation

Wax myrtles are not particular about soil, but they prefer good drainage and slightly acidic soils.

Plant shrubs in partial shade to full sun. They do not require a lot of maintenance. Plants may be pruned (limbed up) to form an attractive small tree with a handsome gray, almost white bark.

Wax myrtles are sensitive to cold. Cold symptoms include browning of leaves and sometimes defoliation, but stem tissue is not injured.

Problems

Wax myrtles are tough, durable shrubs. They have no serious plant diseases or insect pests. Iron chlorosis (yellowing of the leaf tissue between the veins) is a problem in high pH soils.

Cultivars & Varieties

'Fairfax' is a compact spreading form, 4 to 5 feet high, The leaves are lighter green than those of the species.

'Georgia Gem' is a small, compact mounded form, used as a groundcover. It will grow 12 to 18 inches high and 30 to 36 inches wide with yellow-green to dark olive green leaves that are smaller than the species.

Related Species

Northern Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*): This deciduous to semi-evergreen shrub is more cold hardy than wax myrtle. It grows to a height of 9 feet and similar width. The annual growth rate is 12 to 18 inches. The glossy, dark green foliage is followed by persistent, silvery gray berries that provide winter interest. Male and female plants are required for good fruit development.

Prepared by Marjan Kluepfel, HGIC Information Specialist, and Bob Polomski, Extension Consumer Horticulturist, Clemson University. (New 05/99. Images added 03/07.)

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.