

Wax Myrtle

If you have lived in Highlands County for any length of time, you are probably familiar with wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*). The shrubby tree thrives on the ridge and is very common in the natural areas of our beautiful county. The plant is useful in many ways. Not only is it an important plant in nature, but it is an excellent addition to any landscape. Since it is native and common in this area, it thrives in the local soils and weather conditions.

You may be familiar with bayberry candles that are burned mostly in the Christmas season. These plants provide the substance to create them. Wax myrtle is also known as Southern bayberry or candleberry because of its pale blue berries, which are covered with a waxy coating. Pioneers used the fruits to make fragrant bayberry candles. Today, many folks continue to use the berries to produce scented candles.

Wax myrtle has a very distinctive scent which comes from the volatile oils contained in tiny glands on the leaves. These oils cause the plant to succumb to fire very easily. It is a very flammable plant, which is one of the reasons it thrives in the plant communities it lives in. Ecosystems such as pine flatwoods are fire dependent and actually need fire to survive. In natural communities, plants such as wax myrtle will generally come back after the flames have passed.

Wax myrtle is also a great plant to choose for your yard or landscape. It can be used as a tree or a shrub. It produces berries which are a favorite food for many varieties of wildlife. If your desire is to attract critters, this may be one of the best plant choices. The fruits contain fat and fiber that is essential to many animals for their winter diet. Birds, such as wild turkey, bob-white quail, waterfowl, catbirds, thrashers, bluebirds, vireos and warblers are all creatures that enjoy the plant. These critters not only enjoy the fruit the tree produces, but they are the main dispersers of the seeds. A wildlife-friendly screen or hedge can provide food and shelter for many small mammals and other types of wildlife as well.

The plant can either be pruned or left alone to do its own thing. Dense foliage can be encouraged by regular pruning or it can be left untrimmed and form a multiple trunked, interestingly shaped tree. It can also create a thicket because of the suckers that grow from its base. The evergreen leaves are a great addition to any garden and keep a touch of color in the winter months. Wax myrtle can grow to 40 feet tall; the leaves are simple, alternately arranged, oblanceolate and about 2 – 4 inches long. The fruit is small, light green, round and covered with a bluish wax. The fruits are in clusters and attached to short spikes along the branches. The bark is grayish, thin, smooth and patchy in coloration.

The roots of the plant have nitrogen-fixing bacteria which allow the plant to grow in soils that are very poor in nitrogen content. There are male and female plants, with the female producing the fruits.

Overall, the wax myrtle is another excellent choice for most any landscape. It is a hardy, evergreen plant that attracts many types of wildlife. It will be offered at the Air Potato Exchange Day on January 9th at the Agricultural Center. Just collect at least one bag of air potato bulbs,

bring them by from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. and you can pick out one of the many varieties of native plants that will be offered. If you don't know what air potato is, come to the October 16th workshop at the Agriculture Center at 1:00 p.m. It's free and you'll learn a lot about invasive exotics in our state.

Thanks to a grant from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council – Kathy Craddock Burks education grant, about 800 beautiful, native plants will be available. There will also be prizes for the most (by pounds), biggest, smallest and most unique air potato bulb. So be a part of the solution to the exotic problem in Highlands County and receive a beautiful plant in the process. To find out more, call (863) 402-6545 and ask for Corine.