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## Southern Wax Myrtle

### Leaf Identification

**Type:** Simple  
**Arrangement:** Alternate  
**Venations:** Pinnate  
**Margins:** Entire and serrate  
**Shapes:** Oblong, oblanceolate and spatulate

**Fruit Color** White

The fruit is fleshy and round.

### Environment

This plant tolerates some drought, flooding and salt well.  
This plant will grow in dry to wet or submerged soil.  
Suitable soil is well-drained/loamy, sandy or clay.  
The pH preference is an acidic to slightly alkaline (less than 6.8 to 7.7) soil.

### Landscape Uses

- Seashore planting
- Border
- Screen
- Specimen
- Erosion control

### Attributes and Features

- Naturalizing
- Wetlands plant
- Attracts birds
- Attracts butterflies
- Inconspicuous blooms
- Inconspicuous fruit
- Fruit is edible by birds

### *Myrica cerifera*

Southern Wax Myrtle, Southern Bayberry  
Myricaceae (Bayberry)

**Type** Tree, woody plant

**Hardy range** 7B to 11

**Height** 15' to 25' / 4.60m to 7.60m

**Spread** 15' to 25' / 4.60m to 7.60m

**Growth rate** Fast

**Form** Rounded and vase shaped

**Exposure** Partial shade or partial sun to full sun

**Persistence** Evergreen

**Bloom Color** Green

**Bloom Time** Spring

**Leaf Color** Green

**Fall Color** No change in fall color

This plant has fragrant foliage.

### Native Habitat

Southeastern US to south Florida in moist to wet sites, occasionally dry woods.

Native to the following North American locales: Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Mexico, North Carolina, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Virginia

### Crown, Branch and Twig

This plant is asymmetrical with a fine texture and has a moderately dense crown.

This plant's bark is not showy.

Branches or twigs are thin.

This plant is often grown with multiple trunks.

This plant is very flammable.

National champions are 28 x 33 feet (North Carolina), 20 x 38 feet, 25 x 36 feet and 26 x 32 feet in Virginia.



### **Culture Notes**

Plants should be watered regularly until established and will then require no further care. The drawbacks to the plant in urban and suburban landscapes include its tendency to sprout from the roots and sensitivity to disease. This can be a nuisance as sprouts need to be removed several times each year to keep the tree looking sharp. However, making pruning cuts on this plant invites lethal stem diseases. Therefore, it is best left unpruned in a naturalized garden as this thick growth could be an advantage, since it would provide good nesting cover for wildlife. Only female trees produce fruit provided there is a male nearby, but seeds do not appear to germinate readily in the landscape. Trees live for about 15 years, if you are fortunate and keep pruning to a bare minimum.

There are distinct populations in Texas and Florida and probably in other places where this plant grows in very dry, sandy sites along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. These would be the ones to propagate from if you want to plant Waxmyrtle on this type of site. Those from wet sites may do poorly here. Some trees in ditch banks died in the southeastern US as a result of the 1998-2000 LaNina weather event that caused severe drought. This was an exceptional weather event.

Pruning wounds are entry ports for canker diseases. Nitrogen fertilization encourages development of wilt disease which is lethal. Nitrogen fertilizer is not necessary anyway since roots fix nitrogen. Shearing and pruning can spread disease to adjacent Waxmyrtles. Plants might survive best if dug at times other than winter.

In a landscape situation, prune lower branches regularly to keep them small in diameter. If these branches grow to be large and have to be removed later the large pruning cuts required can initiate decay and are entry points canker fungi. This shortens the life of the tree. Female plants are considered mostly allergy free and causes little or no allergy problems in most people; males produce abundant pollen which can cause allergy reactions in certain people.

Plants serve as hosts for red-banded hairstreak (*Calycopis cecrops*) butterfly larvae. Waxmyrtle burns easily in fire so it should be kept 30 feet from a home in areas prone to fires. Natural oils in the foliage allow it to ignite and burn as readily as dried, dead foliage.

### **Maintain adequate mulch area**

Be sure to clear all turf away from beneath the branches and mulch to the drip line (the edge of the branches), especially on young trees, to reduce competition with turf and weeds. This will allow roots to become well established and keep plants healthier. Locate the tree properly, taking into account the ultimate size, since the tree looks best if it is not pruned to control size. The tree can enhance any landscape with its delightful spring flush of foliage. It can be the centerpiece of your landscape if properly located.

### **Planting and establishing shrubs**

The most common cause of young plant failure is planting too deep. Plant the root ball no deeper than it was in the nursery. In most instances, the root flare zone (point where the top-most root in the root ball originates from the trunk) should be located just above the landscape soil surface. Sometimes plants come from the nursery with soil over the root flare. If there is soil over this area, scrape it off. The planting hole should be at least twice the width of the root ball, preferably wider. In all but exceptional circumstances where the soil is very poor, there is no need to incorporate anything into the backfill soil except the loosened soil that came out of the planting hole. Never place ANY soil over the root ball. If a row or grouping of plants is to be installed, excavating or loosening the soil in the entire bed and incorporating organic matter enhances root growth and establishment rate.

Weed suppression during establishment is essential. Apply a 3-inch thick layer of mulch around the plant to help control weed growth. Keep it at least 10 inches from the trunk. If you apply it over the root ball, apply only a one or two inch layer. This allows rainwater and air to easily enter the root ball and keeps the trunk dry. Placing mulch against the trunk or applying too thick a layer above the root ball can kill the plant by oxygen starvation, death of bark, stem and root diseases, prevention of hardening off for winter, vole and other rodent damage to the trunk, keeping soil too wet, or repelling water. Regular irrigation through the first growing season after planting encourages rapid root growth, which is essential for quick plant establishment.

### **Pests, Diseases and Damaging Agents**

Pests: Caterpillars, webworms, and mites may occasionally attack the foliage. Webworms common in some landscapes - prune to remove infestation.

Diseases: Susceptible to several lethal diseases. Avoid any unnecessary pruning to help prevent this. Cankers including *Ptychogaster* canker may form on old branches and trunks and kill them and the entire tree. Remove dead branches down far enough to reach clear wood. Also, a lethal wilt disease caused by the fungus *Fusarium oxysporum* and *Fusarium* spp. has been recently noted attacking Waxmyrtle plants in central and south Florida. *Sphaeropsis* gall infects plants in the east. Fungus



spreads in wet weather during active growth. Branches die back. The only control is to prune to remove infected branches. *Inanotis* heart rot decays the oldest xylem. Mushroom root rot can cause decline. This is a short lived tree due to these problems.

