

Waxmyrtle

Common waxmyrtle or Southern bayberry (*Morella cerifera*; formerly *Myrica cerifera*) is native to South Carolina and other southeastern States. Its range is from New Jersey to Florida and westward to Texas.

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. Waxmyrtle plants are either male or female. Only female plants bear berries.



Waxy gray berries of common waxmyrtle (*Morella cerifera*).
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Growth Rate

Common waxmyrtle 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.

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



Common waxmyrtle (*Morella cerifera*) growing as a hedge in a beach community.

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Cultivation

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

Common waxmyrtle should be planted 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.

Common waxmyrtle is sensitive to cold. Cold symptoms include browning of leaves and sometimes defoliation, but stem tissue is not injured. Common waxmyrtle grows well in USDA zones 7 to 10.

Problems

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

Cultivars

- 'Fairfax' has a compact mounding form that grows to 6 to 8 feet high. The leaves are smaller and lighter green than those of the species. This spreading, colonizing selection was found in Fairfax, South Carolina.
- 'Don's Dwarf' has a compact habit, and grows to 3 to 5 feet tall and wide. This female cultivar is resistant to leaf spot.
- 'Tom's Dwarf' is a male selection that grows to 3 to 4 feet (to possibly 6 feet) tall and 4 to 6 feet wide. This male cultivar has resistance to leaf spot.
- 'Hiwassee' is a larger selection that is more cold hardy than the straight species. It withstood -4 °F in Tennessee without leaf burn.
- 'Wolf Bay' Grows to 20 feet tall, and is more upright and thicker than the species.

Related Species

Dwarf Waxmyrtle or Dwarf Bayberry (*Morella pumila*; formerly *Myrica pumila*): As the name implies, this dwarf waxmyrtle has the smallest height and the leaves are considerably smaller than the other species in South Carolina. The plants grow to less than 3 feet tall and are strongly stoloniferous, which means the plants spread to form colonies. Flowering in this dwarf species is about 3 weeks later than in the common waxmyrtle. It grows

primarily in the coastal plain pinelands. This species grows well in USDA zones 7 to 10.

Northern Bayberry (*Morella pensylvanica*; formerly *Myrica pensylvanica*): This deciduous to semi-evergreen shrub is more cold hardy than common waxmyrtle. It grows to a height of 6 to 10 feet and 10 to 15 feet wide. 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. This species grows best in cooler climates from USDA zones 3 to 6.

This deciduous species is native from parts of North Carolina coast and northward. It is distinguished from the common waxmyrtle in that its leaves are shorter and wider, and the twigs are much stouter. The fruits are twice the size of the common waxmyrtle. This species, like the dwarf waxmyrtle, is stoloniferous.

Swamp Bayberry or Evergreen Bayberry (*Morella caroliniensis*; formerly *Myrica caroliniensis* or *Myrica heterophylla*): This species is more or less evergreen, and has the largest leaves of the related species. It also may be distinguished from the other species by the blackish older branches. It is primarily limited to the Southeastern coastal plain in wet savannahs and pine flatlands.

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