
Wildflower Spot – December 2015
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

WAX MYRTLE

Morella cerifera

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

For fast, easy-care screening in southern gardens, Wax Myrtle is unbeatable. This shrub or small tree is not fussy about soil and light requirements, grows fast, and has attractive light olive-green, spicy-fragrant foliage. Branches can be pruned to encourage dense foliage and to create wildlife-friendly screens and hedges. It is winter-hardy in our area, with leaves that usually remain green through the winter.

Flowers are tiny and bloom before new leaves appear. In the fall, the pale blue, waxy berries which appear on female trees are eaten by a wide variety of birds, many of whom require the fat as fuel for migrations. The wax was a source for the colonists' bayberry candles.

This Virginia native is a dependable shrub, tolerant of wet soils, and is common everywhere in the Coastal Plain. A relative, Pocosin Bayberry, (*Morella caroliniensis*) likes the wet soils in bogs and peaty swamps, and occurs south of the James River, but is rare in the northern Coastal Plain. Preferring drier habitats like dunes and open sandy forests, Northern Bayberry, (*Morella pensylvanica*) is common in the outer Coastal Plain on the Eastern Shore and in Virginia Beach city. Fruits are somewhat larger and leaves are longer than those of Wax Myrtle. Northern

Bayberry holds its leaves over the winter, but they will drop before spring.

Wax Myrtle fixes atmospheric nitrogen at a higher rate than legumes such as peas and beans, and so is able to thrive in infertile soils. This shrub was first cultivated in 1699 for medicinal purposes, since its leaves, bark, and fruit have chemicals with anti-inflammatory and antibacterial activity. Aromatic compounds present in Wax Myrtle foliage seem to repel insects, particularly fleas. It was traditionally planted around southern homes to help keep living spaces pest-free, and a sprig of wax myrtle in a closet or drawer is reputed to keep cockroaches out.

Familiar winter birds in our area, Myrtle (Yellow-rumped) Warblers are so named because they are often seen in these shrubs. These winter residents are able to survive on the fruits of juniper, poison ivy, and these bayberries. This has given them a large long-term advantage over most of our other warblers and many other birds which make increasingly perilous journeys to winter in the tropics. ❖



Photo: Wax Myrtle (*Morella cerifera*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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