

Waxmyrtle

By *Fred Nation*, Educator, Baldwin County

Waxmyrtle or southern bayberry (*Myrica cerifera*) is a large colonial shrub or small tree that is native to the coastal plain from Maryland through Florida, westward into Texas. In Alabama the range is primarily the southern half of the state, though it can sometimes be found in mixed-forest areas in the piedmont region.

The leaves are evergreen, elliptic or lance shaped, alternate, 2 to 4 inches long, reduced toward the ends of the branches. They are usually widest above the middle, and irregularly toothed, mostly toward the tips. Both leaf surfaces have yellow, resinous glandular dots, which give the plants an overall yellow-green appearance. The Indians and early settlers are said to have used the aromatic leaves as an insect repellent in bedding, and around animal pens to repel fleas.

Waxmyrtle is usually dioecious, with male and female flowers on separate plants. The female flowers produce large quantities of small woody, nut-like drupes in short, dense catkins along the stems. The fruits are covered with a pale gray wax, which can be extracted by boiling in water. The species name, *cer-*



ifera, means "wax-bearing." Bayberry candles and soap have been made from the wax.

Most of our native habitats in the southern half of Alabama contain waxmyrtle populations. They have several adaptations that make them successful generalists, at home in areas as diverse as barren clay ridges and salt marshes.

They are highly fire-adapted, and readily resprout from burned or cut stems and from rhizomes. Waxmyrtles also have root nodules that fix nitrogen. This probably explains why they are among the earliest pioneer species on eroded or poor clear-cut land.

Waxmyrtle can be an aggressive, troublesome weed in managed timberland. The highly resinous leaves and twigs burn with an extremely hot fire, which can cause damage to small pine trees. On the other hand, this colonial, fire adapted, nitrogen-fixing shrub or small tree can be useful to stabilize and restore badly eroded land. It is used sparingly as an ornamental in landscapes, as a hardy, fast-growing informal hedge.

The Alabama State champion *Myrica cerifera* is 25 inches in circumference, 36 feet tall, with an average crown spread of 23 feet. It is located in Baldwin County, in Daphne on the Historic Village Point Preserve. 🌳

Fred Nation, a freelance writer and photographer in Baldwin County, has nominated or co-nominated 17 Alabama State Champion trees.



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