

## Bayberry – The Scent of New England

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Each region of the country has its own unique collection of sights, sounds and fragrances. Late fall in New England brings to mind the scents of fruity, overripe Concord grapes, sweet, decomposing leaves, and aromatic, piney-like bayberries. To me, the smell of bayberries is akin with family gatherings, pumpkin pie, and other pleasant holiday associations. We always had a bayberry candle, or two, burning and its soft, woody fragrance slowly migrated throughout the house.

Little did I realize that these commercially produced candles were not made from locally grown bayberries like they were during Colonial times. Apparently, 1 bushel of the tiny, waxy fruits only yields 4 pounds of wax. Candles sold now-a-days are either made from more productive species grown in South America or Europe, or are artificially scented.

Several species of bayberry call the east coast region, from southern Canada through the Great Lakes Region and down into Florida and Texas, home. *Myrica pensylvanica*, is the most northern bayberry species with its southern most range somewhere around North Carolina. The evergreen bayberry, *M. heterophylla*, and the wax myrtle, *M. cerifera*,

grow from New Jersey south. All bayberry species have resin glands on their stems, leaves, fruits and catkins. I always give this plant a few strokes when passing it by.

While some bayberry plants further south mature at 35 feet, here in Connecticut, the northern bayberry typically attains a mature height of 3 to 8 feet depending on site conditions. It most often is found growing in sandy coastal areas or around inland lakes. Around here, the bayberry generally exhibits deciduous tendencies although mine keeps its leaves quite a while most years.

Plants are usually dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers are borne on separate plants. Inconspicuous, pale yellow flowers open in March and April. They have neither petals nor sepals and are often missed unless you go searching for the small catkins. Female catkins are roundish while male ones are elongated. The narrow leaves are a handsome, dark green; slightly serrated and tapered at both ends; they range from 1 to 4-inches in length. If pollinated, the female flowers produce light grey nutlets covered with a waxy coating which the early Colonists made into candles.

To make the wax, the fruits were boiled. The wax floated to the top and was collected when it cooled and hardened. It is sometimes used to scent soaps and ointments.

Historically, the bayberry plant was used for medicinal purposes. In the South, the Choctaw Indians drank a decoction of the boiled leaves to treat fevers. Settlers in Louisiana looked to the wax liquefied in hot water as a cure for serious cases of dysentery. New England herbalist, Samuel A. Thomson, popularized bayberry in the nineteenth century believing it would cure colds, flu, diarrhea, fever and other infectious diseases. Poultices were made from the root bark and reputed to heal cuts, bruises and insect bites.

With the advent of newer technologies an analysis of the substances present in bayberry was made in the recent past and some testing done to determine its benefits and/or toxicity. Aromatic bayberry contains a number of compounds including flavenoids such as myricitrin, an antibiotic, triterpenes, tannins, phenols, resins and gums. One study found that bayberry bark extracts could cause malignant tumors in rats, however, so it is probably wiser to use this plant as a wonderfully fragrant ornamental and go visit a physician when ill.

While probably not something that we should eat, a good many song and game birds feed on the waxy fruits. As they grow along the Eastern seaboard, a major bird migration route, they serve as an important food source to many species including one type of swallow that is especially dependent on the energy produced by these berries to power their journey south.

In the home landscape, bayberries would work well on sunny sites in foundation plantings, mixed shrub borders or even as hedges. Because of their salt tolerance, these plants are recommended for coastal areas. They are fairly easy to grow and also to maintain, needing water for initial establishment and then just during prolonged dry

periods as well as the occasional removal of wayward branches. In the wild, bayberries are found either on peaty soils in full sun or along inland lakes. Mix in some peat moss or other low nutrient organic matter into the soil on hot, dry sites. They prefer our native, acidic soils so limestone applications are typically not necessary. A slow release fertilizer applied once a year or every other year is generally sufficient to meet nutritional needs.

Check out bayberries when looking for native plants to add to your yard. I find these plants irresistible and I bet you do too. If you have questions on growing bayberries or on any other gardening topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, visit our web site at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.