

Learning about Southern Waxmyrtle *Myrica cerifera*



Southern waxmyrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) is a native shrub that inhabits a wide variety of sites from swamps to upland woods. The waxy berries are a high energy food source for birds in the winter, attracting migratory warblers, among others.

Characteristics. Southern waxmyrtle is a large shrub to small tree, from 3 – 4 m in height and 2-3 meters across. It has olive to gray-green leaves, 2-8 cm in length and 0.5-1 cm wide, that have a bayberry scent when crushed.

Waxmyrtles are fast growing shrubs with evergreen foliage. Leaves are alternate, simple and have course teeth above the middle. The leaves are smooth on top and hairy underneath, with small orange glands on both sides. The plants are *dioecious*, meaning the plants are either male or female. They are tolerant of salt spray and wind.

Fruit. The berries appear attached in clusters to the stems and branches from October through December on female plants. Berries are about 2 mm in diameter. They are light green to bluish-white in appearance and have a strong bayberry scent. Berries are an important food source for yellow-rumped warblers as well as several other birds, such as the white-eyed vireo, ruby-crowned kinglet and the palm warbler.

Geographic Range. A native shrub that is found along the eastern coast of the United States from New Jersey to southern Florida, and through the Gulf states to Texas.

Additional Information.

- Yellow-rumped warblers have special digestive enzymes that break down the waxy coating found on the seeds of waxmyrtles.
- Berries were collected by early pioneers and boiled to make wax for candles. It took about five pounds of berries to make one to two candles.
- *Myrica* is an old Greek name, possibly for a tamarisk tree, which is a slender-branched shrub or small tree common near salt water. *Cerifera* means wax-bearing.
- Waxmyrtles fixes atmospheric nitrogen, like legumes.
- Waxmyrtles provide habitat for wildlife as well as food for migrating birds.
- Waxmyrtles grow very fast, as much as five feet in height and width in a single growing season.
- Waxmyrtles make good beach plants, since they tolerate drought, sand, sun and salt spray.

References:

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Photos by Tommy and Pam Blanchard.