



This article is part of a weekly series published in the Batavia Daily News by Jan Beglinger, Agriculture Outreach Coordinator for CCE of Genesee County.

Master Gardener Corner: Northern Bayberry

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Northern Bayberry

Source: Dow Gardens, Dow Gardens, Bugwood.org

Northern Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*), is a dense-branched deciduous shrub with an open, rounded shape. Typically growing 6 to 12 feet high, it is frequently wider than it is tall. The multi-stemmed shrubs tend to sucker and may form good-sized colonies under ideal growing conditions. Bayberry is native to eastern North America. Hardy in zones 3 to 6, it is primarily found growing along the eastern coast from Newfoundland to western New York and south to North Carolina.

Bayberry plants are dioecious which means that individual plants either have male or female flowers. Groupings of plants need at least one male plant to facilitate pollination of the female plants and to set fruit. Flowers occur in early spring and are not showy. Pollinated female plants produce very fragrant, BB-sized, blue-grey, waxy-coated berries in the fall. The glossy, semi-evergreen, dark green foliage is aromatic when crushed. The leaves slowly turn bronze or tan in the autumn and may hang on the shrub into the winter.

Relatively easy to grow, plants grow best in full sun but will tolerate partial shade. They do well on dry, sandy, infertile soils but prefer acidic soils. They will also tolerate clay soils. Avoid soils with a high pH as plants may develop chlorosis. Northern bayberry has nitrogen fixing root nodules. This enables them to thrive in areas where many other plants could not survive. Bayberry is also tolerant of salt spray.

When planting, remove any surrounding vegetation first as it does not compete well. Plants should be well watered until established. Mulch around newly planted seedlings to help retain soil moisture and control weeds. Once plants are established, extra watering should not be necessary except in periods of extended drought.

Bayberry is a tough plant as it tolerates multiple environmental stresses such as heat, drought, soil compaction, seasonal flooding and salt. In the landscape bayberry is best used as an informal hedge, in groupings or mass planted. It can also be used in woodland gardens, shrub borders, as a screen, in wet sites, or for erosion control. Its salt tolerance makes it useful for planting near roads or driveways. Bayberry should be allowed to grow naturally with minimal pruning to remove dead or broken branches.

Only a few named cultivars of bayberry have been developed for sale in the nursery trade. Usually it is the species that you find for sale. A few selections are sometimes offered by nurseries. 'Myda' is a female clone, while 'Myriman' is a male pollinator. Chicagoland Grows® has introduced the Silver Sprite™ selection which has male and female plants ('Morton' and 'Morton Male'). They grow 5 feet tall with a 7 foot spread. Several other available varieties include 'Wildwood,' a US National Arboretum selection and 'Bobzam'

Bobbee,[™] a Lake County Nursery introduction. Both are more compact than the species and grow to about 6 feet tall.

The bayberry fruits are eaten by many bird species, including turkey, pheasant, chickadees, red-bellied woodpeckers, downy woodpeckers, mockingbirds, catbirds and Eastern bluebirds. The berries of northern bayberry are 50.3 percent fat, which is a great energy source for birds trying to survive a cold winter. Bayberry thickets also provide cover and nesting sites for songbirds, offering protection from predators.

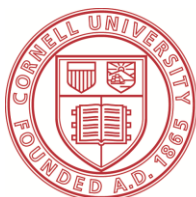


Berries on Silver Sprite[™] Bayberry
Myrica pensylvanica 'Morton'
Source: Chicagoland Grows

Candleberry is a common name for bayberry as the aromatic wax on the berries was a source of candle and sealing wax for early American settlers. The wax from the berries is still used today to make candles, cosmetics and soap. The berries are put in boiling water so that the wax will float to the top. The wax melts at 116 to 120 degrees F. It can take four pounds or more of the small berries to produce one pound of wax. Bayberry wax can vary in color from sage green to olive green and it is more brittle and harder than beeswax. Candles made from it are smokeless and aromatic. Bayberry wax is often combined with beeswax when making candles.

Candles made from the labor-intensive wax were much sought after and frequently saved for special occasions or given as gifts. Folklore states that if you light a new bayberry candle on Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve and allow it to burn out on its own, you will have health, wealth and prosperity in the coming year. One version of the old adage says, "A bayberry candle burnt to the socket, brings food to the larder and gold to the pocket." Other versions also bring "joy to the heart" and "luck to the household."

Resources for this article include: University of Maine, Missouri Botanical Garden, USDA NRCS, University of Connecticut Plant Database, Ohio State University, Chicagoland Grows[®], CapeMay.com, Audubon and "Dirr's Encyclopedia of Trees and Shrubs."



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