Bayberry

Would you plant a shrub that tolerates all soils, endures salt spray and runoff, forms privacy screens, bears fruit enjoyed by songbirds, and is not damaged by deer? If so, consider bayberry.

A bayberry candle appeared in my family’s living room each December. I adored its fragrance. It became part of the anticipation surrounding our holidays, perhaps more than the American Flyer trains under the Christmas tree!

It took several years before I met the aromatic bayberry shrubs in person. They hid in plain sight during our Cape May, New Jersey vacations. My father assured me these were seaside plants that would not do well at our northeastern Pennsylvania home. Much to my amazement, my father was wrong!

Northern Bayberry, *Morella pensylvanica*, is distributed all along the mid-Atlantic coastal regions of North America, where it forms clumps that help stabilize dunes. While commonly found along the coast, this native shrub thrives from Newfoundland to North Carolina and west to Ohio. It grows in USDA plant hardiness zones 3a through 8b.

Usually, coastal bayberry plants are only one to two feet tall. Inland bayberry typically reaches five to six feet, occasionally as tall as 10 feet. Its multiple stems form a mounded shape. Under ideal conditions, bayberry creates colonies by suckering. This feature makes it suitable as an informal hedge, privacy screen, or bank for erosion control. Because this shrub commonly grows along the coast, it tolerates wind and salt.

Thus, bayberry is ideal for planting along highways treated with salt in the winter.

Not fussy about light, bayberry does best in full sun to partial shade. It prefers sandy, dry, infertile soils that are somewhat acidic. Bayberry thrives in poor soils because it is a nitrogen-fixer. That is, bayberry has a symbiotic relationship with nitrogen-fixing bacteria that gather nitrogen gas from the atmosphere. Then the bacteria convert it to nitrogen compounds in the soil that plants can use.

Bayberry’s oblong leathery leaves are grayish-green. When crushed, the leaves emit the classic bayberry aroma from the resin dots on the underside of the leaves. These simple leaves are arranged alternately along branches. In the more southern parts of its range, the leaves are semi-evergreen, slowly turning bronze or tan throughout the autumn and winter. Farther north, the leaves are deciduous. The leaves are larger, up to four inches long and almost two inches wide in more southern, inland areas. Along the coast, particularly to the north, the leaves rarely exceed 1.5-inches in length.

Northern bayberry, also called candleberry, is usually dioecious with separate male and female plants. The wind-pollinated flowers are inconspicuous catkins that appear in late spring. Female flowers develop into fruits clustered on the stems. Initially, the sessile fruits are green and covered with dense hairs. As they mature, the berries become blue-gray and covered with a light gray waxy coating. Wildlife, especially songbirds, feast on the persistent fruits. Deer rarely damage bayberry plants.
In the southern part of its range, common wax myrtle, *Morella cerifera*, replaces northern bayberry. Wax myrtle, or southern bayberry, is evergreen and taller than its northern cousin. Its berries are smaller and wax-bearing, as denoted by its specific epithet.

Early colonists, reliant on candles for light, gathered the bayberry fruits. After boiling the berries in water, the candlemakers skimmed the waxy layer from the water’s surface. The remaining blue-green water-dyed homespun cloth. Because the fruits are BB-sized, only 0.1 to 0.2-inches in diameter, at least five thousand fruits are needed to make a two-ounce candle. The fragrant bayberry candles do not smoke or sputter, making them valuable and reserved for special holidays.

We overlook northern bayberry in our inland landscapes. Consider using it next time you look for a tough shrub to fill an area.

**Resources**

NRCS: Northern Bayberry, *Morella pensylvanica* (Mirb.) Kartesz

Missouri Botanical Garden: Myrica pensylvanica

University of Connecticut: *Myrica pensylvanica*, Northern Bayberry, Candleberry

University of Maryland: Northern Bayberry

USDA: Northern Bayberry, *Morella pensylvanica* (Mirb.) Kartesz

Cape May Plants, An Identification Guide: Myrtles & Bayberries

Clemson Cooperative Extension: Waxmyrtle

**Authors**

Mary Jo Gibson
Master Gardener, Columbia County

extension.psu.edu