**Leucothoe axillaris** (J.B.A.P.M. de Lamarck) D. Don **Coastal Leucothoë**

(Andromeda acuminata, Andromeda axillaris, Andromeda catesbaei, Andromeda lanceolata, Andromeda longifolia, Andromeda spinulosa, Andromeda walteri, Leucothoe catesbaei, Leucothoe platyphylla, Leucothoe spinulosa, Leucothoe walteri, Lyonia axillaris)

**Other Common Names:** Coastal Doghobble, Dog-Hobble, Fetter-Bush, Leucothoe, Swamp Dog-Laurel.

**Family:** Ericaceae.

**Cold Hardiness:** Cold tolerance ranges from USDA hardiness zones 5 to 9.

**Foliage:** Evergreen, alternate, simple, lanceolate to narrowly ovate leaves are 2” to 4” long; blades are glabrous, with mostly entire margins or rarely finely serrate, acute to acuminate tips, lustrous, dark green, and bases broadly acute to rounded; venation is reticulately pinnate, slightly impressed above, and lighter green than the ground tissue of the blade; petioles are short, stout, and green flushed red; foliage may bronze in winter.

**Flower:** Drooping, 1” to 3” long racemes are borne in spring; the small inverted urn-shaped individual flowers terminate in five tiny lobes and are waxy white to white blushed pink; flowers are distributed fairly evenly around the raceme relative to *L. fontanesiana*; flowering occurs from buds on the previous year's growth; bees utilize the flowers, but the nectar is reported to contain poisons.

**Fruit:** The fruit are tiny ovoid, five-lobed capsules, which are not particularly ornamental but do persist.

**Stem / Bark:** Stems — arching stems are glabrous, medium-fine to medium textured, green, or lightly flushed red at petiole bases; leaf scars are crescent to half circular; the pith is more or less threesided and continuous; Buds — terminal buds lacking; the small axillary buds are few-scaled, solitary, sessile, ovoid-oblong and appressed to the twigs; Bark — green becoming yellow-green, then a smooth grey at maturity.

**Habit:** Coastal Leucothoe are small, 2’ to 4’ (6’) tall by 4’ to 5’ (7’) wide, multi-stemmed, evergreen shrubs with arching fountain-like branching; the overall texture is medium to medium-coarse.

**Cultural Requirements:** Placement of this genus in the Ericaceae should be a strong indication of the need for acidic soils, in general the species in this genus perform well only on moist, organic, acidic soils; they are not drought tolerant and are frequently found naturally in swampland or other moist environments along water courses or margins; most members of the Leucothoe require shade in our region and typically are found there in their native habitats; *Leucothoe axillaris* is particularly susceptible to damage from winter wind and sun exposure, but tolerates summer heat well provided the other afore mentioned conditions are provided; good air movement and small duration of morning sun helps prevent leaf spot development.

**Pathological Problems:** Leaf spots are a problem where foliage stays moist in warm environments.

**Ornamental Assets:** Dainty axillary clusters of spring flowers, tolerance to wet soils, lustrous evergreen foliage, and limited grazing by deer are the primary assets.

**Limitations & Liabilities:** This species fairs poorly in hot dry landscapes and / or on high pH soils; all plant parts are reported as highly poisonous.

**Landscape Utilization:** Utilization includes naturalizing in shady moist sites, shade gardens, near woodland pathways, or on the north side of buildings as a facer or foundation plant; however, wherever it is utilized the soils must be moist, acidic, and humusy; *Leucothoe* often pair well with species from the genera *Rhododendron* and *Camellia*.

**Other Comments:** This genus represents a group of interesting plants for shady moist sites and where native are often used as indicators of natural wetlands; the genus name honors a lover of Apollo who was killed by her enraged father, Orachamus, when he found out she had given herself to the god; Apollo supposedly sprinkled her body with perfumed nectar where her father had buried her alive and this lovely shrub sprang forth; lovers of the gods often fared poorly, but at least we got some nice plants out of it; this is a pretty common theme in Greek and Roman mythology; the specific epithet refers to the axillary location of the flowers.

**Native Habitat:** *Leucothoe axillaris* is native to wet sites across the Coastal Plain of the Southern USA from Virginia to Louisiana.
Related Taxa: Several genera are included in the *Leucothoe*, which is sometimes alternatively placed in the genus *Andromeda* L.; in addition to *L. axillaris* and *L. fontanesiana*, *Leucothoe recurva* (S.B. Buckley) A. Gray (*Andromeda recurva*, *Eubotrys recurva*), Recurved Leucothoe, and *Leucothoe racemosa* (L.) A. Gray (*Andromeda racemosa*, *Cassandra racemosa*, *Eubotrys racemosa*, *Lyonia racemosa*, *Zenobia racemosa*), Swamp Leucothoe or Sweet-Bells, are also found in the Southeastern USA; the inflorescences of *L. recurva* arch up before recurving to a drooping position, while the inflorescences of *L. racemosa* are in long downward arching racemes with the tiny flowers pointing upward rather than drooping as in *L. axillaris* or *L. fontanesiana*; both *L. recurva* and *L. racemosa* are deciduous and are seldom encountered in the nursery trade, but have similar growth forms and could be used for similar wet environments as *L. axillaris*.

*Leucothoe fontanesiana* (E.G. von Steudel) H.O. Sleumer

(Drooping Leucothoe)

(*Andromeda fontanesiana*, *Andromeda lanceolata*, *Leucothoe axillaris* var. *editorum*, *Leucothoe catesbaei*, *Leucothoe editorum*)

- Also known as Dog's-Hobble, Highland Doghobble, Mountain Dog-Laurel, or Switch Ivy, this is probably the most ornamental of the *Leucothoe*, but is better adapted to northern Ozark portions of our region than more southern locations; Drooping Leucothoe takes its name from the long drooping spikes of ¼” long, waxy, white, urn-shaped, fragrant flowers occurring in late winter to spring; the long lanceolate leaves are glossy green or variegated with white, creams and pinks; popular cultivars include 'Girald's Rainbow', 'Scarletta', and 'Rollisoni'; this species offers a somewhat showier foliage and flowers than *L. axillaris*, but *L. fontanesiana* has more stringent site requirements.

- The growth habit is similar to that of *L. axillaris*, with the primary differences occurring in leaf shape/color, length of inflorescence, and tendency to be more restricted in suitable locations; stems tend to be more decidedly zigzag in appearance than on *L. axillaris*; the foliage tends to bronze or purple in cold climates in winter; the specific epithet honors the French botanist René Louiche Desfontaines.

- This species also contains the highly toxic compound andromedotoxin which can be fatal if ingested; plants are found natively in the Southern Appalachian Mountains and Piedmont areas, but are widely planted as a shade shrub or woodland naturalizing plant for moist sites in many warm and cool temperate regions including portions of the eastern and northern parts of our region; Drooping Leucothoe has a narrower useful range than *L. axillaris* being hardy in humid portions of USDA hardiness zones 6 to 8; it is prone to similar leaf spots as *L. axillaris*.

References: Core and Ammons, 1973; Foote and Jones, 1989; Grimm, 1993.