

Myrtus communis L.

Myrtle

(*Myrtus boetica*, *Myrtus buxifolia*, *Myrtus italica*, *Myrtus latifolia*, *Myrtus minima*)

Other Common Names: Bride's Myrtle, Roman Myrtle, Sweet Myrtle., Sweet Roman Myrtle, True Myrtle, True Roman Myrtle.

Family: Myrtaceae.

Cold Hardiness: Useful in USDA zones 9(8b) to 11.

Foliage: Evergreen; opposite; simple; ovate to lanceolate; 10 to 20 long; fine textured; acute to acuminate tips; rounded to cuneate bases; margins are entire; dark lustrous green; stiff; aromatic if crushed; pinnately veined with the main vein paler and impressed above and raised beneath; petiole $\frac{1}{8}$ or shorter and yellow-green, green, or flushed red in color.

Flower: Perfect; small, $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ across; white to pinkish white; numerous stamens are present; solitary or in small axillary clusters in late spring to early summer; mildly interesting; fragrant.

Fruit: Fruits are slightly elongate globose berries about $\frac{1}{2}$ in diameter and are generally reminiscent of blueberries in shape and color; green turning reddish or pinkish and then eventually blue-black when ripe in late summer to fall.

Stem / Bark: Stems — twigs are fine textured; initially green in color, rapidly turning orange-brown and then gray-brown; Buds — foliose; very tiny, $\frac{1}{16}$ long or less; tan-brown in color; Bark — handsome with age; the bark is smooth and gray-brown in color, eventually developing a brown peeling aspect showing the lighter tan inner bark.

Habit: The species type develops an irregular upright oval form, eventually becoming a small tree 12N to 15N tall in old age; plants are often shorn to maintain a lower profile, say under 5N or 6N overall; plants are fine textured and are reminiscent of the Common Boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*) in form.

Cultural Requirements: Locate plants in full sun to light shade; heat, drought, and salt tolerant; avoid exposure to winds to reduce winter injury; plants are intolerant of poorly drained soils and high humidity, so they are often planted in raised beds or containers; growth is moderate to fairly slow, particularly on the compact cultivars.

Pathological Problems: Myrtle is prone to infestation by scale insects and subsequently sooty mold may develop; root rots occur on wet soils; thrips and spider mites can attach in hot weather.

Ornamental Assets: Handsome fine textured foliage and excellent adaptability to shearing are key assets; flowering is noticeable.

Limitations & Liabilities: Limited cold tolerance, intolerance to poor drainage, and susceptibility to scale insects are the primary limitations.

Landscape Utilization: Formal sheared hedges are the principle use for the species; old specimens can be limbed up into small trees; *Myrtus communis* is excellent for hedges, screens, patio planters and pots, or for providing a dark green background for perennial or annual color plantings; Myrtle is a classic for Mediterranean gardens and historic, period, scent or educational gardens; compact forms are a favorite for knot garden borders; Myrtle is a favorite of coastal landscapers and works as a bonsai.

Other Comments: *Myrtus communis* is the classic myrtle of antiquity; the genus name is the Greek name for *M. communis*; the specific epithet means common or typical.

Native Habitat: Thought to originate from Iran and Afghanistan, *M. communis* has been cultivated throughout the Mediterranean region since the beginning of recorded history.

Related Taxa: Several dwarf selections have been made for more compact growth habits; 'Compacta' (*Myrtus communis* var. *compacta*, Dwarf Myrtle, Dwarf Roman Myrtle) is a slow growing dwarf selection maturing at about 2N tall; 'Microphylla' (*Myrtus communis* var. *microphylla*, Narrow-leaf

Myrtle) is also slow growing and a dwarf cultivar with narrow compact foliage, but it matures a bit larger than 'Compacta'; 'Boetica' (*Myrtus boetica*, Twisted Myrtle) is a selection used for its interesting trunk and branching patterns and is best limbed up as a small tree or planted in large containers as a sort of big bonsai specimen.

References: Boyle, 1960; DeWerth. 1967; Dirr, 2002; Friend, 1942; Hume, 1929; Jones and Sacamano, 2000; Loeb and Carpenter, 1992; Odenwald and Turner, 1996; Welch and Grant, 1995.

Copyrighted 2004 with all rights reserved by Michael A. Arnold; intended for future publication in *Landscape Plants For Texas and Environs, Third Edition*.