

Marlberry

(*Ardisia escallonioides*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Marlberry is an evergreen shrub that occurs naturally in coastal strands and hammocks and pine rocklands throughout Central and South Florida. It blooms and fruits intermittently throughout the year, with peak blooming summer through fall. Marlberry's abundant fruit is enjoyed by birds and small animals and is also edible to humans. Its dense foliage provides significant cover for wildlife.

Its fragrant flowers may be creamy white or pinkish, have distinctly noticeable yellow anthers, and are born in dense terminal or axillary panicles. The plant's thick, dark green leaves are glossy, lanceolate to elliptic and tend to reflex upward. They are petiolate and alternately arranged. Leaf margins are entire. Bark is smooth, thin and whitish-gray. Fruits begin as small green to reddish drupes that turn shiny and black when mature. Each fruit bears a single hard seed.



Photo by Ryan Fessenden

Family: Myrsinaceae (Myrtle family)*

Native range: Peninsula from Flagler, Pasco and Polk counties south into the Keys

To see where natural populations of Marlberry have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 9–11

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Dry to moist, well-drained organic, sandy or calcareous soils

Exposure: Full sun to partial shade

Growth habit: 3–18'+ tall (tallest in southern climes)

Propagation: Seed

Garden tips: Marlberry is often overlooked as a landscape plant, but this shrub to small tree is attractive and versatile. It works well as a specimen plant and when used as a hedge or buffer, as it can easily be pruned or trimmed to maintain a desired shape or size. The plant is salt- and drought-tolerant and will grow in sunny and shady landscapes.

Caution: Marlberry may be confused with its non-native cousins, Coral ardisia (*Ardisia crenata*) and Shoebuttan ardisia (*Ardisia elliptica*). Coral ardisia is differentiated from Marlberry by its crenately toothed leaf margins and bright red berries. Shoebuttan ardisia's flowers are a bit larger than Marlberry's and pinkish purple. Both are Category I invasives that are known to displace native species and alter natural communities. If present, they should be removed and destroyed.

*Some sources classify the genus *Ardisia* in the Primulaceae (primrose) family.

Marlberry plants are often available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants. Visit www.PlantRealFlorida.org to find a nursery in your area.