

February 2019 Plant of the Month



Morella pensylvanica (Mirb.) Kartesz; Northern Bayberry

February 2019's edition of the **Plant of the Month** highlights a common and widespread native New Jersey shrub. *Morella pensylvanica* is a member of the family Myricaceae, the Bayberry family. Mary Hough (1983) found the species Statewide; Stone (1910), who referred to the shrub as *Myrica carolinensis*, described the distribution as "casual" throughout the Northern and Middle districts, and frequent in the Pine Barrens and in Cape May.

New Jersey is home to four members of the genus: *Morella pensylvanica*, *M. cerifera*, *M. gale*, and *M. carolinensis*, formerly known as *Myrica heterophylla*. *Morella gale* is a northern species restricted today to Valley and Ridge province. The three other species overlap in Cape May and the coastal strip. *Morella cerifera* distribution is best described as a shrub that borders the Delaware Bay from Salem County east and is found in the coastal strip north to Ocean County. *Morella carolinensis* is restricted to wetland habitats on the Coastal Plain, specifically the Outer Coastal Plain.

All species have dark green leaves supporting leaf surface waxy "atoms" or glandular wax dots. *Morella pensylvanica* and *M. carolinensis* are weakly evergreen as juveniles, with full deciduous leaf loss on adult specimens. Both have broad wedge shaped leaves with most waxy coatings on the lower surface, whereas *Morella cerifera* has a narrow near evergreen leaf with waxy coatings found on both top and bottom leaf surfaces.

Morella as a genus that has been in cultivation for centuries. *Morella pensylvanica* has been grown in gardens since 1754 (Rehder, 1940). The aromatic scented leaves and stems were discovered by Native Americans since time immemorial. Each species had similar uses in tinctures and decoctions for medicine, food and dyes.