

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

A native to Florida, the Buttonwood is a low-branching, multi-trunked, shrubby, evergreen tree that can grow up to 40 feet tall. Its open canopy is usually rounded. It has alternate leaves that are simple, lance-shaped with smooth edges, and are medium-green. The leaf surface is smooth and leaves can be from 2 to 8 inches long. One of the best places to find this tree at the Preserve is toward the end of the Saylor Trail at Wiggins Pass.

The Buttonwood loves full sun and sandy soils. It can tolerate occasional wet feet, but prefers well-drained soils. It tolerates salt water over-wash from storm surges and heavy salt spray. The root system consists mainly of laterals and fine roots that help stabilize the surrounding soil. It does not tolerate freezing temperatures. It has a medium growth rate and may live for several decades. This is another plant great for home landscaping with a high drought tolerance, requiring little water or fertilizer.

Buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*)



The "button" part of the common name refers to the resemblance of the dense, rounded flower heads and fruit to old-fashion shoe buttons. The inconspicuous, small, greenish flowers appear in dense cone-like heads in terminal panicles in spring and are followed by 1/2-inch, cone-like, red-brown fruits. The fruit heads may contain from 35 to 56 fruits each. Thin, dry, two-winged seeds are densely packed into these fruit clusters. These clusters usually stay on the tree through much of the winter before the seeds separate and fall to the ground. The tree has an attractive dark brown bark that is ridged and scaly looking.



There is another variety of this plant called the Silver Buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus* var. *sericeus*) that has most of the characteristics of *Conocarpus erectus*, with the exception of its height and leaves. The Silver Buttonwood only gets about 20 feet high and its light green leaves take on a silvery look because of it has hairy leaves; hence the name Silver" Buttonwood. You may see this variation in front of the booth at the entrance to the Preserve. One of the Silver Buttonwood's leaves is shown to the right. Notice its silvery fuzz. Both varieties have two nectary glands that you can see at the base of each leaf (pointed out with the red arrow at right). These glands are said to secrete a sweet substance to attract insects.



Although protected in Florida, there are folk remedies that are still used in some of the Caribbean areas. The bark and leaves have been used in tannery. The tree has also been used as fuel (charcoal), resulting in stripping many coastal regions of this valuable plant. A decoction was considered diuretic and used for intestinal problems and to staunch bleeding of surface wounds.