

# Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Marlberry is a native of South Florida and is sometimes referred to as marble berry or dogberry. Marlberry is a member of the genus *Ardisia*, one of 40 genera of the *Myrsinaceae* family. This family has over 1,000 species of tropical trees and shrubs but **only** two members, Marlberry and Myrsine, are present in the United States—both **only** in Florida and both found at Barefoot Beach Preserve. This plant may be found in coastal hammocks and pinelands of south Florida, including the Keys. Marlberry prefers well-drained, sandy soils. It is usually an understory species, growing in the shade of taller trees such as pines and cabbage palms. You may readily find this plant near the chickee hut off the western Saylor Trail.



Marlberry is a large evergreen shrub or small tree that usually grows to 12 – 15' in height but can reach heights up to 25'. It has a narrow, columnar crown with branches that bend downward when the tree flowers and fruits. It usually is multi-trunked and mature trunks have light gray to pinkish white bark. The thin trunks only get 2 – 3" in diameter. The narrow leaves are 3 – 6" long and 1 – 2" wide, simple, and alternately arranged. The leaves have leathery, glossy, yellow-green, upper surfaces with paler surfaces underneath. The leaf base is wedged

and the leaf tip is acute to rounded. The leaf margin is entire (smooth) and thickened. The leaves are arranged spirally along the branch, with the blades often curving downward lengthwise.

The small, white, fragrant flowers occur in dense terminal panicles (clusters at the end of the branch) that are up to 5" in length, with the individual flower only about 1/8" across, with five petals. Flowers are borne at intervals during the year but do not last very long. This plant bears small fruit that turns from yellow-green, to red and finally a purplish-black when ripe. Being in the subtropics, you may find fruit and flowers at intervals during the year.

Currently, there are many berries on the ones near the chickee hut off the Saylor Trail. The fruit is round and glossy, about 1/4" wide. It has a thin skin covering a dry, fleshy interior enclosing a single red-brown seed. The fragrant flowers attract a number of pollinating insects, including butterflies. Because this plant tolerates drought and can be showy with its clusters of flowers, it is a good landscape plant to be used for a hedge or specimen plant in your yard. Marlberry is easily propagated from seed. **Caution when purchasing:** A member of the same genus as Marlberry is *Ardisia crenata*, a non-native shrub imported from East Asia and introduced to Florida as an attractive landscape plant because of its bright red berries and glossy foliage. *Ardisia crenata* is fast becoming a troublesome invasive, leaving people's yards and moving into wooded areas. Easiest way to differentiate: the invasive has wavy leaf margins. When purchasing, make sure you get the native.



Native Americans in Florida called this tree the black tobacco-seasoning tree, because they mixed its leaves with their tobacco to make it go further. It is useful to birds, squirrels and other mammals as a food source. The tart, acidic fruit is edible but unappealing to some people—perhaps how good or bad it tastes depends on how hungry someone is. Remember, some people have allergies, so be cautious.

**Marlberry** (*Ardisia escallonioides*)

