Persea borbonia: Redbay¹
Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson²

Introduction
This handsome North American native evergreen tree can reach 50 feet in height with a comparable spread but is often seen somewhat shorter and wider, particularly when grown in the open in an urban area. The glossy, leathery, medium green, six-inch leaves emit a spicy fragrance when crushed and the inconspicuous, springtime flower clusters are followed by small, dark blue fruits which ripen in fall. These fruits are enjoyed by birds and squirrels and add to the tree’s overall attractiveness. The trunk bears very showy, ridged, red-brown bark and frequently branches low to the ground forming a multi-stemmed habit similar to live oak, but it can be pruned to make a single, short central leader which would be most suitable for many urban plantings.

General Information
Scientific name: Persea borbonia
Pronunciation: PER-see-uh bor-BOE-nee-uh
Common name(s): Redbay
Family: Lauraceae
USDA hardiness zones: 7B through 11 (Fig. 2)
Origin: native to North America
Invasive potential: weedy native
Uses: deck or patio; shade; specimen; street without sidewalk; reclamation; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; highway median
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

Figure 1. Mature Persea borbonia: Redbay
Credits: Ed Gilman

Figure 2. Range

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**Description**

Height: 30 to 50 feet  
Spread: 30 to 50 feet  
Crown uniformity: symmetrical  
Crown shape: spreading, round  
Crown density: dense  
Growth rate: moderate  
Texture: medium

**Foliage**

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)  
Leaf type: simple  
Leaf margin: entire  
Leaf shape: ovate, lanceolate, oblong, elliptic (oval)  
Leaf venation: pinnate, brachidodrome  
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen, broadleaf evergreen, fragrant  
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches  
Leaf color: green  
Fall color: no color change  
Fall characteristic: not showy

![Figure 3. Foliage](image)

**Flower**

Flower color: green, white/cream/gray  
Flower characteristics: not showy

**Fruit**

Fruit shape: oval, round  
Fruit length: less than .5 inch  
Fruit covering: fleshy  
Fruit color: blue  
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

**Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; showy; typically one trunk; thorns  
Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure  
Breakage: susceptible to breakage  
Current year twig color: green  
Current year twig thickness: thick  
Wood specific gravity: unknown

**Culture**

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade  
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; occasionally wet; well-drained  
Drought tolerance: high  
Aerosol salt tolerance: high

**Other**

Roots: not a problem  
Winter interest: no  
Outstanding tree: yes  
Ozone sensitivity: unknown  
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown  
Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

**Use and Management**

Thriving on little care in full sun or partial shade, Redbay can tolerate a wide range of soils, from hot and dry to wet and swampy. Redbay is a rugged and adaptable plant suitable to many landscape applications. Unfortunately, the wood is reportedly brittle and subject to wind damage. Pruning to keep lateral branches less than half the diameter of the trunk will increase the tree's longevity and help prevent branches from separating from the trunk. The densely-foliated, spreading branches create a lush, billowly, rounded canopy making Redbay a wonderful shade tree. It can make a nice street tree planted on 20 to 25-foot centers but be sure to prune it properly as mentioned above. Plant with caution where cars will park or near sidewalks since birds love the fruit and often visit the tree, leaving their droppings on cars. The fruit can also be messy on cars and walks. Its ease of growth and neat, dense crown habit also make Redbay ideal for the low-maintenance and naturalized landscape. The dark brown, furrowed bark is particularly attractive on older specimens.

Propagation is by seed which germinate readily after several months in the ground.

**Pests and Diseases**

Redbay is occasionally bothered by twig dieback. This can be caused by a boring insect which bores inside a small twig causing the leaves on the end of the twig to turn brown and hang on the tree. This can be bothersome to a nursery operator, but usually only causes cosmetic damage to landscape trees. Insect-caused galls can distort and disfigure the leaves but do not significantly harm the tree. Scale insects occasionally infest the twigs or leaves, followed by sooty mold.