

Ardisia escallonioides Marlberry¹

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Introduction

Marlberry is a 12- to 15-foot-tall shrub native to Florida and the Caribbean region that has a very important place in planting design. It often occurs naturally with sabal palms and stoppers. The dark green, semi-glossy leaves of this shrub are 3 to 4½ inches long. The small, white, fragrant flowers occur in dense terminal panicles that are 5 inches in length. Flowers are borne at intervals throughout the year but do not last very long. In the late spring this plant bears its small purple fruit.



Figure 1. Flower—*Ardisia escallonioides*: marlberry.
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

General Information

Scientific name: *Ardisia escallonioides*

Pronunciation: ar-DIZ-ee-uh ess-kal-lon-ee-OY-deez

Common name(s): marlberry, marbleberry

Family: *Myrsinaceae*

Plant type: tree

USDA hardiness zones: 10 through 11 (Figure 2)

Planting month for zone 7: year-round

Planting month for zone 8: year-round

Planting month for zone 9: year-round

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year-round

Origin: native to Florida

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: hedge; near a deck or patio; specimen; screen; attracts butterflies; border

Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries



Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

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Description

Height: 12 to 20 feet

Spread: 6 to 12 feet

Plant habit: oval

Plant density: symmetrical habit with a regular (or smooth) outline and individuals having more or less identical forms

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval)

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristic: pleasant fragrance; flowers periodically throughout the year

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: less than ½ inch

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristic: suited for human consumption; attracts birds

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; not particularly showy; no thorns

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun

Soil tolerances: acidic; alkaline; sand; loam

Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerance: unknown

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

Marlberry is great in mixed group and background plantings. It can be trained into a small tree by removing lower foliage and branches to expose the interesting trunk pattern. The multiple trunks become an interesting element in the landscape, and they look nice lighted at night. Space them 15 feet apart along an entrance road or sidewalk to create a nice linear planting of multi-trunked small trees. Since they will remain quite dense even in partial shade, they make a great screen for residential landscapes.

This shrub prefers well-drained soils and a semi-shade to full-sun location in the landscape. It will grow in soils with a wide pH range from a sandy humus to calcareous shell and is fast-growing.

Marlberry is easily propagated from seed.

Design Considerations

Marlberry works well as a background or massing plant to highlight the forms and colors of companion plants and block undesirable views. Overall the shrub has a coarse texture with deep vein leaves and multiple branching. The dark green leaves of the marlberry will show well with contrasting plants that feature smaller leaves with a soft texture in burgundy or variegated colors such as a *Loropetalum*. Other contrasting forms include thin blades and the clumping, arching forms of grasses or low-growing ground cover with a sprawling, mounding form to emphasize the upright vase shape of marlberry. The white flowers will pair with any other color and the contrast usually highlights the other colors, making them appear more saturated and brighter. To create a dense plant wall select plants with similar characteristics that blend with the marlberry.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.