Carissa macrocarpa Dwarf Natal Plum[1]

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Introduction

Dwarf natal plum is an evergreen ground cover that is known for its attractive foliage, flowers, and fruits. This dense, spreading plant will reach a height of only 12 to 18 inches. The natal plum has small, leathery, ovoid leaves that are dark green in color accompanied by sharp, bifurcate (forked) spines about 1 ½ inches long. White, star-shaped flowers that are 2 inches wide appear throughout the plant in the spring. The fragrant flowers are solitary and have overlapping petals. Bright red fruits are about 2 inches long and ripen throughout the year. They are plum-shaped berries occasionally used for jellies and preserves. Twigs bleed a milky sap when they are injured.

Figure 1. Full Form—*Carissa macrocarpa*: Dwarf Natal Plum
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

General Information

Scientific name: *Carissa macrocarpa*

Pronunciation: kuh-RISS-uh mack-roe-KAR-puh

Common name(s): dwarf natal plum

Family: *Apocynaceae*

Plant type: ground cover

USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11 (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.
Credits: undefined

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

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Origin: native to Africa

Invasive potential: not considered a problem species at this time and may be recommended by UF/IFAS faculty (reassess in 10 years)

Uses: bonsai; border; mass planting; container or above-ground planter; ground cover; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); medium-sized parking lot islands (100–200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size)

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 1 to 2 feet

Spread: 4 to 8 feet

Plant habit: spreading

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: terminal spine

Leaf shape: ovate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristic: summer flowering; pleasant fragrance

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: 1 to 3 inches

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristic: suited for human consumption; persists on the plant

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; acidic; alkaline; loam

Drought tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerances: good

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: not applicable

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Use and Management

The natal plum is very effective as a hedge or foundation plant, but this species is small, hugging the ground. This habit makes it well suited for planting as a ground cover where an established stand with its dense canopy will prevent weed growth. This natal plum is very effective beneath or in front of tall shrubs or small trees to help set them off in the landscape. Dwarf natal plum is superb for coastal landscapes and will grow up to the first dune.

Grow this plant in full sun to light shade on a well-drained sandy soil. Roots can rot if soil is poorly drained. It is highly drought and salt tolerant, requiring no irrigation once established.

Pests and Diseases

Florida red scale is a common pest. Foliar bacteria and root rots can also be troublesome.