

***Vaccinium arboreum*, Sparkleberry¹**

Michael G. Andreu, Melissa H. Friedman, Mary McKenzie, and Heather V. Quintana²

Family

Ericaceae, heath family.

Genus

Vaccinium stems from the Latin word *vaccin*, or “of a cow.”

Species

The species name, *arboreum*, stems from the Latin root “arbor,” meaning “a tree,” because it is the only North American member of the *Vaccinium* genus that reaches a size comparable to that of a tree.

Common Name

Sparkleberry, Farkleberry, Tree-Huckleberry, Winter-Huckleberry

The common name “sparkleberry” began to show up in the literature by 1891 and was given to the plant because of its rather shiny berries. The common name “farkleberry” is thought to be a misinterpretation of the word “sparkleberry.”

Description

This native and small-statured tree grows best on sandy and dry soils, and can reach up to 25 feet in full sun to partial shade. Its range extends throughout the southeastern United States, from Virginia south to Florida, west to Texas, and north to Kansas. Leaves are deciduous but can exhibit

more evergreen characteristics in the warmer climates of its southern range. The simple, alternately arranged leaves are 2 inches long and range in shape from elliptical to obovate. The tips of the leaves are rounded and the margins may or may not exhibit small serrations. The thinly veined leaves are a glossy dark green on the topside and a lighter green with slight pubescence on the underside. Bark is thin, flaky, and brownish red, and the trunk can grow as a single or multi-stemmed tree. Flowers are white and fragrant with 5 ¼-inch-long lobes that create a bell-shaped appearance. Flowers bloom during the spring months and emerge in clusters that measure 2 to 3 inches long. The shiny, black ¼-inch berries contain 8 to 10 seeds. Berries ripen in the fall and remain attached to the plant throughout the winter.



Figure 1. Leaves and fruit of *Vaccinium arboreum*.
Credits: CA Floristics, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

1. This document is FOR 258, one of a series of the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date June 2010. Reviewed February 2022. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.
2. Michael G. Andreu, associate professor of forest systems; Melissa H. Friedman, former biological scientist; Mary McKenzie, former research assistant; and Heather V. Quintana, former research assistant; School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.

Allergen

This species causes few to no allergies.

Storm Tolerance

This small tree has a high resistance to wind.

Applications

Commercial/Practical

Sparkleberry has generally been grown for its showy flowers and eye-catching foliage rather than its edible yet bland berries. However, the larger fruits of sparkleberry have historically been used in jellies and pies.

Cultural

Settlers used the wood of sparkleberry as handles for tools, and it is thought that the Seminoles did as well.

Horticultural

This tree has great potential to be one of Florida's principle plants in landscape and horticulture, but is currently underutilized. Its small stature allows it to sit comfortably in both large and small yards, and its shiny foliage and numerous but small white flowers make this tree an enjoyable sight, particularly when it's in bloom. In addition, the delicate, bell-shaped flowers have a pleasant aroma, and the shiny black or blue berries further add to the aesthetic value of this tree. Even the trunk and limbs of sparkleberry are visually pleasing, with their twisting shapes and pale bark that flakes to reveal a pleasantly contrasting reddish color beneath.

Medicinal

Extracts of the leaves have been used to treat sore throats and loose stools, and juice from berries has also been used to treat recurring cases of dysentery.

Wildlife

Large and small mammals and numerous songbirds use the fruits produced by this tree as a food source in the fall.

References

Austin, D. F. 2004. *Florida ethnobotany*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Borrer, D. J. 1988. *Dictionary of root words and combining forms*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Duryea, M. and E. Kampf. 2007. *Selecting Southeastern Coastal Plain tree species for wind resistance* (FOR119). Gainesville, FL: UF-IFAS Florida Cooperative Extension Service. Retrieved from <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fr174>

Godfrey, R. K. 1988. *Trees, shrubs, and woody vines of Northern Florida and adjacent Georgia and Alabama*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

Haehle, R. J. and J. Brookwell. 2004. *Native Florida plants: Low-maintenance landscaping and gardening*. Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing.

Little, E. L. 2005. *National Audubon Society field guide to trees, Eastern region*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Nelson, G. 1994. *The trees of Florida: A reference and field guide*. Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press.

Ogren, T. L. 2000. *Allergy-free gardening: The revolutionary guide to healthy landscaping*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

Osorio, R. 2001. *A gardener's guide to Florida's native plants*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. (n.d.). *PLANTS database*. Retrieved from <http://plants.usda.gov/index.html>