

Lyonia lucida, Fetterbush¹

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Family

Ericaceae, heath family.

Genus

Lyonia is named after John Lyon (1765-1814), a Scottish man who worked in the gardens of Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

Species

The species name, *lucida*, stems from the Latin word *lucens*, which means “glittering, shining, clear.”

Common Names

Fetterbush, Shiny Lyonia

The common name “fetterbush” refers to the growth habit of this shrub, because it tends to restrict or “fetter” the movement of humans or animals when it grows in abundance. The name “shiny lyonia” refers to this plant’s shiny leaves.

Description

This native evergreen shrub is found along margins of damp swamp lands and ponds as far north as Virginia, south to Florida, and west to Louisiana. It grows best in full sun to partial shade and can reach heights of 3 to 5 feet. The oval leaves are simple and alternately arranged with a leathery and glabrous texture, and smooth, entire margins.

A major vein encircles each leaf just inside the edge, and a distinct ridge occurs around the lower side of the leaf margin. When young, leaves are a coppery color and as they mature become a darker green, reaching lengths of 1 to 2 inches. Twigs are brown and strongly angular, and plants usually grow with a multi-stemmed trunk. Flowers are bell-shaped, range in color from white to pink, and are approximately ½ inch long. Blooms are fragrant and appear as unbranched, elongated inflorescences that flourish in the late winter and early spring. Fruits are approximately ⅓-inch-long capsules that dry to brown and split open to release the seeds at maturity.



Figure 1. Leaves and flowers of *Lyonia lucida*.
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Figure 2. Close-up of an individual leaf of *Lyonia lucida* showing the vein running along the leaf margin.
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Figure 3. Leaves and dried fruit of *Lyonia lucida* as they appear in the wintertime.
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Allergen

While many plants in the *Lyonia* genus are poisonous if ingested, *Lyonia lucida* is not known to be poisonous. However, many *Lyonia* spp. can cause irritation or a rash if sap comes into contact with the skin. Therefore, most *Lyonia* spp. are considered moderately to highly allergenic.

Applications

Cultural

It has been documented that Seminole Indians used the wood of fetterbush to make bowls for their tobacco pipes.

Horticultural

This shrub makes a great addition to wetter landscapes. Its showy flowers add a splash of color in the late winter and early spring. In addition, shiny lyonia is easy to maintain, making it a desirable addition to the landscape.

Wildlife

Because many members of the genus *Lyonia* are poisonous, they should not be planted in or near areas used by livestock.

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