

Coccoloba diversifolia: Pigeon Plum¹

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Introduction

This upright, densely-foliated, rounded evergreen tree is usually seen at 15 to 25 feet and a spread of 20 to 35 feet, though it can grow larger. Young trees appear pyramidal until the multiple trunks begin spreading. This can form a rounded vase on older specimens. It is a wonderful small to medium-sized tree for subtropical landscapes, typically sporting a multiple trunk. Trunks often grow almost parallel to each other, and embedded or included bark forms regularly, but this does not appear to compromise the wood strength of pigeon plum. The 2- to 4-inch-long, shiny, bright to dark green, leathery leaves drop uniformly in March but quickly emerge as bright red new growth. The small, whitish-green flowers are abundantly produced on 2- to 6-inch-long racemes in early summer, followed by 1/3-inch-long, dark red to purple, berry-like fruit. The single-seeded, somewhat edible fruits ripen in late fall and winter and are very attractive to birds.

General Information

Scientific name: *Coccoloba diversifolia*

Pronunciation: koe-koe-LOE-buh dye-ver-sih-FOLE-ee-uh

Common name(s): pigeon plum

Family: *Polygonaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to Florida, the West Indies, southern Mexico, and Central America

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: native

Uses: hedge; parking lot island 100-200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; reclamation; street without sidewalk; deck or patio; specimen; shade; tree lawn 3–4 feet wide; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; urban tolerant; highway median; container or planter.



Figure 1. Full Form—*Coccoloba diversifolia*: pigeon plum

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 20 to 40 feet

Spread: 20 to 35 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: upright/erect, round, vase

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternat

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: oblong, ovate

Leaf venation: pinnate, brachidodrome

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen, broadleaf evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: bright to dark green and shiny or dull on top, paler green underneath; emerge reddish

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy



Figure 3. Leaf—*Coccoloba diversifolia*: pigeon plum

Flower

Flower color: whitish green

Flower characteristics: showy; emerges in clusters on 2"–6" long racemes

Flowering: year-round, but most abundant in spring and summer



Figure 4. Flower—*Coccoloba diversifolia*: pigeon plum

Fruit

Fruit shape: round to oval

Fruit length: ⅓ inch

Fruit covering: fleshy, berry-like achene

Fruit color: green, turning dark red to purple when ripe

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; not showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem;

Fruiting: ripens late fall to early winter



Figure 5. Fruit—*Coccoloba diversifolia*: pigeon plum

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches don't droop; very showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

Bark: mottled gray and brown, smooth, and flakes off in plates to reveal dark purple inner bark

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: brown

Current year twig thickness: medium, thick

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 6. Bark—*Coccoloba diversifolia*: pigeon plum

Credits: Gritta Hasing

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; acidic; alkaline; moist but well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: high

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: yes

Outstanding tree: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

Use and Management

Although pigeon plum makes a wonderful shade tree, the fallen fruit may create a litter problem on patios and sidewalks, and along streets. But the 2-month inconvenience of messy fruit may be a small price to pay for the wonderful effect this striking tree creates along streets or in a residential yard. Lower branches will need to be removed over time for vehicle clearance along streets, but there is a definite place for the tree along boulevards where cars will not park. The 1- to 2-foot wide, straight, upright trunks have grayish-brown bark that falls off in plates to reveal dark purplish bark beneath, helping to make pigeon plum a wonderful specimen tree. It looks striking as a specimen lighted at night from beneath the canopy. Trees trained to a single trunk in the nursery can be very useful for planting along streets where vehicle clearance is needed.

Fast-growing in full sun or partial shade, pigeon plum does best on moist, well-drained soils. It has good salt tolerance. Be sure to slice and otherwise drastically disturb and pull apart the root ball on pot bound, container-grown trees. Pot-bound trees have a reputation for rooting out poorly into landscape soil.

Propagation is by seed.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern. Chewing insects will occasionally riddle the new growth, but control is not usually required.

Reference

Koeser, A.K., Friedman, M.H., Hasing, G., Finley, H., Schelb, J. 2017. *Trees: South Florida and the Keys*. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.