

Prunus caroliniana: Cherry-Laurel¹

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Introduction

Cherry-laurel, a dependable, easily grown, North American native, is densely foliated with glossy, dark green, evergreen leaves. The tree can reach 40 feet in height with a 25-foot spread though is often seen smaller when grown in the open. Cherry-laurel will create a dense screen or hedge with regular pruning, but is also attractive when allowed to grow naturally into its upright-oval, dense form. Properly trained to a central leader, the plant could make a good small to medium-sized street tree.

The tree usually maintains a good central leader and small-diameter, strong lateral branches following one or two proper pruning's before the tree is 8 to 10 years old. Cherry-laurel was widely planted in Texas until the severe drought of the early 1950s weakened these trees there. Many of the weakened trees eventually died from borers.

General Information

Scientific name: *Prunus caroliniana*

Pronunciation: PROO-nus kair-oh-lin-ee-AY-nuh

Common name(s): cherry-laurel, Carolina laurelcherry

Family: *Rosaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 8A through 10A (Figure 2)

Origin: native to the southeastern United States and eastern Texas



Figure 1. Full Form - *Prunus caroliniana*: cherry-laurel
Credits: UF/IFAS

1. This document is ENH-664, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2018. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.
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UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: native

Uses: street without sidewalk; deck or patio; screen; hedge; reclamation; trained as a standard; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); tree lawn 3-4 feet wide; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; urban tolerant; highway median



Figure 2. range

Description

Height: 25 - 40 feet

Spread: 15 - 25 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: oval, round

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage



Figure 3. Canopy - *Prunus caroliniana*: cherry-laurel
Credits: UF/IFAS

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire, serrulate

Leaf shape: oblong, lanceolate, elliptic (oval)

Leaf venation: pinnate, brachidodrome

Leaf type and persistence: broadleaf evergreen, evergreen, fragrant

Leaf blade length: 2 - 4 inches

Leaf color: dark green and shiny on top, dull green underneath

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy



Figure 4. Leaf - *Prunus caroliniana*: cherry-laurel
Credits: UF/IFAS

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristics: showy; fragrant; emerges on 2-3" long racemes

Flowering: winter



Figure 5. Flower - *Prunus caroliniana*: cherry-laurel
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Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: 1/3 to 1/2 inch

Fruit covering: fleshy; shiny drupe

Fruit color: black

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

Fruiting: spring and summer



Figure 6. Fruit - *Prunus caroliniana*: cherry-laurel
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Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches don't droop; not showy; typically one trunk; no thorns

Bark: reddish brown, smooth, and peppered with lenticels when young, then darkens to gray or almost black, and splits and fissures with age

Pruning requirement: little required

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: brown

Current year twig thickness: thin

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 7. Bark - *Prunus caroliniana*: cherry-laurel
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Culture

Light requirement: full sun to full shade

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; slightly alkaline; acidic; well drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: no

Ozone sensitivity: sensitive

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible

Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

Use and Management

In springtime, tiny, creamy-white showy flowers appear in dense, fragrant clusters and are followed by small, shiny, black cherries, which are attractive to wildlife. The flowers attract a lot of bees. The great quantity of fruit may create a short-term litter problem if the trees are located near a

patio or walkway, but the fruit is small and washes away quickly.

The quick growth and ease of maintenance makes Cherry-Laurel ideal for naturalizing and for low-maintenance gardens, except that hundreds of seedlings can be found beneath the crown each year from germinating seeds. Of course, the seedlings would not be a problem in a street tree planting or in an area such as a lawn or highway median, which is mowed regularly. Though the crushed leaves and green twigs give off a delicious maraschino cherry fragrance, they are quite bitter and possibly poisonous. Root systems are often quite shallow, but usually they are not aggressive and do not cause problems.

Preferring ample moisture while young, Cherry-Laurel is otherwise well suited to sun or shade locations on any average, well-drained soil. Once established, Cherry-Laurel is salt- and drought-tolerant, requiring little or no irrigation. Over-irrigating can cause chlorosis and death. Do not plant in wet, soggy areas. The tree adapts well to soils with high pH. Clay soil is fine as long as water doesn't stand after rain.

The Cherry-Laurel cultivar 'Compacta' has a dense, compact habit of growth, to about 20 feet tall.

Propagation is by seeds, by cuttings, or by digging seedlings, which appear in great numbers around mature plants.

Pests

Some of this tree's pests are mites, borers, and caterpillars. Borers are troublesome on stressed trees.

Diseases

Cherry-Laurel may be infected by leaf spot, fire-blight, and stem canker. It can be difficult to grow in containers due to root rot and over-irrigation.

Reference

Koeser, A. K., Hasing, G., Friedman, M. H., and Irving, R. B. 2015. Trees: North & Central Florida. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.