

Forget flowers — scented foliage lasts all year

Saturday, May 3, 2014

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FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

As published in the *Miami Herald*, 5/3/14.

Why wait for the flowers to scent your garden? There are plants with foliage that rival the scent of any bloom, and they last a lot longer than the ephemeral flower.

My favorite has got to be the bay rum tree (*Pimenta racemosa*), sometimes called West Indian bay (not to be confused with bay laurel, *Laurus nobilis*). It indeed supplies the main ingredient used in the classic bay rum aftershave your grandpa might've used. I use it sometimes as well.

Its scent is reminiscent of the old Caribbean — rum, woody, quite spicy with cinnamon and a hint of vanilla and citrus. If gentlemanly adventure had a scent, it would be bay rum. The foliage of the bay rum tree smells as wonderful, or better, than the aftershave.

Bay rum will grow to about 25 to 30 feet tall, and keeps a nice cylindrical, columnar profile. With a small footprint, it fits in well in a small yard. Or you can trim it to keep it shorter and bushier.



Bay rum tree can be kept columnar to take up less horizontal space. Kenneth Setzer/FTBG.

Being native to the Caribbean, once established it can thrive in our region with some benign neglect.

It needs bright sun and summer rains, and we sure have that in the Southeast. Mine grows in a rocky, bright spot in full sunlight. It has grown quickly but doesn't get out of control. The bark is splotched in shades of beige and gray, and is self-exfoliating. So when the bark starts to peel, do not fret! Your tree is fine.



Peeling bark of the allspice and bay rum trees is normal. Kenneth Setzer/FTBG.

The bay rum tree produces small clusters of white flowers, and fruits in small green globes that mature to purple and black. But it's the elongate, glossy green leaves that carry the intoxicating smell when rubbed, and especially when crushed. You can pick and break up a few and use them to scent your home just like potpourri. Better still, search online for the many bay rum formulas to use them in. Or throw some in hot bath water.

In the same genus as bay rum is allspice (*Pimenta dioica*). The dried fruit of this tree, when ground, creates the allspice used in cooking. It is an essential part of Jamaican cuisine. The tree appears in most ways very similar to bay rum; Allspice leaves may be a little more puckered, and to my nose smell a little medicinal compared to the richness of bay rum.

Allspice and bay rum are in the Myrtaceae family, along with many stoppers and other aromatic trees. There is definitely a strong family resemblance among them, especially in their mottled bark.



Bay rum: Its glossy leaves carry an intoxicating scent. Kenneth Setzer/FTBG.

Allspice (*Pimenta dioica*) and Bay Rum (*Pimenta racemosa*)

Posted on [March 16, 2013](#) by [Leonard Goldstein](#) August 5, 2016

The genus *Pimenta* comprises 14 flowering species, among which are some of the most interesting and desirable aromatic trees in the world. But it's all a mistake . . . a big mistake. Spanish explorers poking around Mexico in the 16th century found an attractive medium-sized tree whose berry-like fruits resembled black pepper, so they called it pimienta, the Spanish word for pepper. That error has become preserved in the genus name. We concentrate below on two of the most significant representatives of *Pimenta*.

Pimenta dioica, the specific plant mistaken for a new source of black pepper, is better-known to most people as the allspice tree or, in another long-perpetuated error, the Jamaican pepper. The name allspice was bestowed on it by the English around 1621 because they considered its complex taste a combination of clove, cinnamon and nutmeg. The first recorded instance of the importation of the spice into Europe came in 1601.

This beautiful tree reaches 30-40 ft. high and features aromatic, leathery, glossy, oblong 4-8 in. leaves. The bark, whitish-gray in color, peels away in thin sheets. The tree produces clusters of white flowers which are followed by berry-shaped fruits that mature purple-black. However, in the commercial production of allspice, the fruit is picked green and dried in the sun. The major volatile oil responsible for this species' fame is eugenol.

The allspice tree is native to the Greater Antilles (Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Cuba), southern Mexico and Central America. While the tree is now cultivated in many tropical areas of the world, it is apparently the only spice processed commercially solely in the New World, particularly Mexico, Honduras, Jamaica, Trinidad and Cuba. Jamaica was the leading exporter of allspice, at least until the 1990s, but there is now some indication that Mexico has superseded it, and Honduras and Guatemala are becoming major exporters.

Once *P. dioica* is established, it withstands drought and even has some cold tolerance — 26-28°. It can be grown nicely as a container specimen, as well as in the ground, and performs best in full sun. While the allspice tree may not flower and fruit dependably outside native areas, it is still quite desirable; even the bark is aromatic!

Most folks know that the spice is used in a variety of condiments, and also in pies, cakes and candies. But eugenol is also an important constituent of cosmetics and perfumes. And it may surprise some to learn that allspice is even found in the liqueurs Benedictine and Chartreuse, as well as in Northern European food staples such as pickled fish and sausages. Eugenol also has medicinal applications as an aid to digestion and an anesthetic for toothaches. This would appear to suggest that the pies, cakes and candies which contain allspice must also cure toothaches. Could there be a more perfect food?

The second tree, *Pimenta racemosa*, better-known as Bay Rum or West Indian Bay Tree, is variable in height, maturing in the 12-40 ft. range, but generally shorter than *P. dioica*. It is native to the West Indies and possibly northern South America. The tree bears attractive, small white flowers which give way to black ovoid fruits. This species has about the same cultural requirements as the allspice tree, but is several degrees less cold-hardy.

Bay rum is distilled from the berry-like fruits of *P. racemosa*, but this essential oil is not used in beverages because in that concentration ingestion is toxic. Instead, it is used as a constituent of colognes, perfumes and soaps. On the other hand, the leaves of this species are fine for consumption as a syrup or herbal tea, or in cooking. Leaves are sold fresh or dried. Medicinally, bay rum has long been employed to treat sore muscles and various strains and sprains. Scientists later discovered that the essential bay oil contains a constituent possessing anti-bacterial properties. And even more recently, at least one study has characterized bay oil as a potent antioxidant.

FLORIDATA PLANT ENCYCLOPEDIA

Pimenta dioica

Common Names: allspice, pimento, Jamaica pepper^{Family:} **Myrtaceae** (myrtle Family)



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This young allspice tree makes its home at the Fruit and Spice Park in Miami, Florida.

Description

The spice or condiment, allspice, is made from the dried, unripe fruit of the allspice or pimento tree. This is a small tree that grows to 40 ft (12.2 m) tall, with large 4-8 in (cm) long leaves. These are leathery, evergreen, opposite, oblong, aromatic and quite attractive. The whitish gray bark peels in thin sheets. The white flowers are about a 0.25 in (0.6 cm) across and borne in many flowered pyramidal cymes originating from the leaf axils. The fruit is a brown berrylike drupe, about a 0.25 in (0.6 cm) long. The leaves and fruit smell like a combination of cloves, black pepper, nutmeg, and cinnamon, hence the common name.

Location

Allspice, *Pimenta dioica*, is native to the West Indies, southern Mexico and Central America. It was "discovered" in Mexico by 16th century Spanish explorers who called it "pimienta", confusing it with black pepper. (Those traveling Spaniards were so intent on finding a new source of black pepper, that they also confused the New World chilis with that precious East

Indian spice.) Nowadays allspice is grown commercially in Mexico, Honduras, Trinidad, Cuba, and especially in Jamaica, which practically has a monopoly. It is the only spice whose commercial production is entirely confined to the New World.



The flowers of allspice are small and not showy but the foliage is very handsome.

Culture

LIGHT: Full sun. **MOISTURE:** Drought tolerant when established. **HARDINESS:** USDA Zones 10 - 11. May survive with protection in 9B. Established trees can tolerate temperatures down to 28°F (-2.2°C), but will be damaged at temperatures around 25°F (-3.9°C). **PROPAGATION:** By seed.

Usage

This is a slow growing, beautiful little tree and well worth growing in a container on a patio or, in tropical climates, in a shrub border. It may not flower and fruit outside its native range, but the big glossy aromatic leaves are an attraction.



Allspice, the spice, is a brown powder that smells like cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg.

Allspice is used in pickles, ketchup and marinades, and to flavor pumpkin pies, cakes and candies. An oil pressed from the fruits is used in perfumes and cosmetics. The liqueurs, *Benedictine* and *Chartreuse*, contain allspice flavoring. Northern Europeans use allspice in sausages and pickled fish. The principal essential oil in allspice is eugenol, the same as found in cloves. Eugenol is used as an anesthetic for tooth aches and as a digestive aid.

Features

The Myrtaceae is a large family of mostly aromatic trees and shrubs that includes eucalyptus, guava, clove tree, and melaleuca ([*Melaleuca quinquenervia*](#)). An oil distilled from the leaves of the closely related bay rum tree (*Pimenta racemosa*) is used to flavor bay rum.

West Indian Bay Tree, Bay Rum Tree

Scientific Name: *Pimenta racemosa* (P. Miller) J. W. Moore

Synonym: *Caryophyllus racemosus*

Family: *Myrtaceae*



Picture from Tropica Mango Nurseries

Recommended Temperature Zone:

USDA: 10-11

Frost Tolerance: Semi tender in Phoenix, leaf damage at 30° F (-1° C), limb damage at 26° F (-3° C)

Sun Exposure: Full sun to light shade

Origin: West Indies and possibly also in northern South America

Watering Needs: Regular water

Blooming Habits:

The bay rum tree inflorescence has 0.4 inch wide white flowers. They are followed by a black ovoid fruit, up to 0.5 inch long.



The West Indian Bay Tree is native from the West Indies. It is related to the Allspice and its leaves are also used for cooking. It contains a fragrant oil that somewhat resembles clove oil. This oil used to be distilled in rum and water from the leaves, to produce bay rum, used as cologne. The fruit, bay rum and essential oil are toxic and should not be ingested.