

BEACH PLUM

Prunus maritima Marsh.



The beach plum (*Prunus maritima* Marsh) is a wild, native plum which grows in abundance along the beaches, among the sand dunes, and on the coastal plains of Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. The beach plum fruit is used to make jellies and jams.

Growth and fruiting habits of the beach plum vary -- a common trait in seedling plants. It resembles a bush more often than a tree. Some bushes sucker freely from the roots and produce dense thickets. The roots are coarse, rangy, and deep. The fruit is small and is edible raw but is not usually used for this purpose. The fruit

color may range from red through purple to blue. Yellow fruited bushes are found occasionally. Besides producing fruit, the beach plum is useful as an ornamental and a soil binder.

Soils and Propagation

The natural home of the beach plum is in light, sandy soils or even the pure sand of the dunes. Although it can exist under these conditions, it grows slowly and bears crops irregularly. When grown in better soils, it becomes much more vigorous but yields are not always improved.

The beach plum can be propagated easily from seed. The pits should be cracked and the seed removed and stored at 40° F in moist sand or peat for two to three months. The treated seed will germinate readily when sown in the garden or in containers. Untreated seeds may take two years to germinate.

Beach plums may also be propagated by root cuttings. Pieces of root three to four inches long can be buried two to three inches deep outside in a sandy soil in the fall. Pieces of root the diameter of a pencil from plants no more than three years old will give the best results.

Planting and Pruning

Beach plums are best transplanted in the spring into a sunny location. Prepare the soil by digging a hole larger than the root ball of the beach plum. Work in some form of organic matter (humus, compost, etc.) and plant the beach plum at the same depth at which it was previously growing. Water the plant well and use a mulch over the root system. Little is known about planting distance. The size and shape of most beach plum bushes suggest a 10 X 10 foot spacing.

Beach plums, like other fruit plants, benefit from pruning. Late winter or early spring is the best time. Wild bushes in poor condition can be renovated by cutting them to the ground and allowing them to develop a new top. Bushes in better condition can be given a more conventional type of pruning. This consists of first re-



moving dead and diseased wood and then taking out weak wood. Low branches may be removed to keep fruit off the ground.

Branches that are crossed and are rubbing should have one removed. If the bush looks too thick, more branches may be cut out to allow better light penetration.

Fertilization

Beach plums need fertilizer but seldom respond to it in the wild. The situations in which they grow are so dry that the lack of water is a limiting factor. When water is short, no amount of fertilizer will increase their growth. If they are grown in a soil with sufficient moisture, they will show a marked increase in growth but yields are not always increased. Young bushes need not be fertilized the year that they are planted. The following spring, apply 2 ounces of a 10-10-10 type fertilizer per bush. Double the amount each spring until a maximum of 1 lb. per bush is reached.

The fertilizer should be broadcast under the spread of the branches instead of concentrated around the trunk. Apply the fertilizer in spring just before the bush blooms.

Pollination

Most beach plums bloom heavily each year but only set a crop once every three or four years. There are several reasons for this. Most beach plums are self-sterile; that is, they won't set fruit if pollinated with their own pollen; they require cross-pollination. It is sometimes helpful to cut some flowering branches from bushes located some distance away and to place these in a bucket of water among your own bushes.

The weather is also a factor in pollination. If it is rainy, foggy, cold or windy during the blossoming period, the pollinating insects are not active, thus there is no transfer of pollen. Cold weather will slow the growth of pollen tubes so that fertilization fails even though pollination has taken place.

Insects and Disease

Beach plum may be attacked by some of the same insect and disease problems that attack cultivated plums. If insects and/or diseases are a problem, a regular spray schedule may be followed using a "Home Orchard" mix.

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