

A taste of plums straight from the beach

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When people think of fresh plums, they either think of supermarkets, or backyard gardens. The beach is not an area that people generally think of as a place for plums to grow. Beach plum (*Prunus maritima*) is a native plant that does very well in the coastal environment that can seem harsh to other species. It even prefers to grow in sand dunes.

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However, a beach house is not necessary for those wanting to grow this unique relative of cherries, peaches, and apricots. This shrub will grow in other conditions including moderately fertile, slightly acidic, loamy and sandy soils. Heavy clay soils are not ideal for growth, whereas moderately well-drained soils are best. The beach plum can also tolerate drought and salty conditions. Just like the conditions in its natural environment, this plant prefers full sun. This shrub is native from Maine to Maryland, and is hardy to zone 3.

Gardeners looking for a multi-purpose plant will find that a beach



Delaware State University/Susan Yost.

Beach plum (*Prunus maritima*) flowers attract pollinators, later leading to sweet fruits.

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plum can make a great addition to their garden for many reasons. This plant flowers from April to May, with attractive white flowers growing in clusters of twos and threes. Insects are attracted to the flowers and serve as pollinators.

Once pollinated the white flowers turn pink. Purplish-black to red fruits ripen in August. Some coastal wildlife can eat the berries, while others can find a habitat in this useful shrub. Just like store bought and garden fresh plums, the beach plum is edible and tastes very sweet when ripened. The seed in the center of the plum should not be eaten because it can contain harmful chemicals. Harvested berries can not only be eaten raw, but can also be made into jellies, jams, syrups, ice cream, and wines. Some coastal states and towns are looking to develop a commercial beach plum industry.

Beach plum can be propagated from soft wood cuttings, grown from seeds, or transplanted. General care of this plant is easy and after the first year can be considered minimal. However, problems with aphids and mildew can arise and should be properly managed. Aphids can be controlled by using insecticidal soaps or by utilizing natural preda-

tors such as ladybugs and lacewings. Mildew can be taken care of by using a fungicide.

This shrub is not just an ornamental. Beaches suffer from yearly erosion. Wearing away of sand can be devastating to the entire coastal ecosystem. Beach plums are commonly grown for coastal stabilization and the restoration of sand dunes. It is particularly useful because it is known for its fast growing rate, with the ability to reach a height of six feet tall. It is a very dense shrub that can reach widths of 4 to 7 feet when planted on a sand dune or 16 to 18 feet when planted inland. Beach plums are perennial, meaning they continue to grow for more than one year.

Beach plums planted at the beach have an unusual growing pattern. When sand starts to cover the lower branches, more roots sprout, which forms more shrubs. This can create a colony of beach plums.

Now when you think of fresh plums think about the beach plum.

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.