Beach Plum: A Shrub for Low-Maintenance Landscapes

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Beach plum (Prunus maritima), a shrub native to the Atlantic coast, is familiar to beachgoers from southern Maine through Maryland, where populations can be found on and near the coastal dunes. Since colonial times its fruits have been collected in the wild for preserves and jelly and were reportedly used even earlier by Native Americans. Nowadays, although beach plum is occasionally found in the nursery trade, it is rarely grown in cultivation. Demand is increasing for native species that can thrive in low-maintenance, poor-nutrient landscapes—reclamation sites, roadsides, sand dunes in need of stabilization—and beach plum is an excellent candidate to fill that need. By virtue of its showy spring flower display and colorful fruits, beach plum also warrants increased use in more intensively managed ornamental landscapes.

Beach plums have extensive root systems, no doubt an adaptation to a habitat that is characterized by high winds, blowing sand, unstable substrates, wind-borne salt, and soil that is low in nutrients and water-holding capacity. It should be noted that beach plum’s distribution is not limited to sandy soils, however; it also thrives under cultivation on moist, rich soil as long as it has good drainage and full sun. Today, jelly production from wild-growing shrubs is a small but thriving cottage industry in the Northeast, and farmers are beginning to plant beach plum to make fruit more readily available.

The horticultural literature of the 1940s mentions several cultivars of beach plum that had been selected for fruit production at that time, but we have been unable to locate specimens. [If a reader knows of any still existing, we would appreciate hearing about it.] More recently, the Cape May (New Jersey) Plant Materials Center of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has released a selection known as ‘Ocean View’; it was developed for stabilizing coastal sand dunes, but could be used in any sunny, well-drained location. The information below has been adapted from NRCS’ “Notice of Release of ‘Ocean View’.”

A New Cultivar of Beach Plum

‘Ocean View’ is a cross of four wild-growing strains from Delaware, New Jersey, and Massachusetts that were selected for their exceptional seedling vigor, foliage abundance, disease and insect resistance, leaf retention, fruit production, and cold tolerance. It has been field-tested on sandy coastal sites from North Carolina to Maine and is recommended for use within zones 5b to 8b.

This new cultivar is an upright, densely branched shrub with pale green foliage. Its alternate, serrated leaves are elliptical to ovate
Beach plum on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

in shape and range from about 1.5 to 2.5 inches in length and half that in width. In early spring, before the leaf buds unfold, clusters of snowy-white blooms emerge to cover the crown of the shrub, creating a frothy splash in the otherwise gray landscape. The individual flowers, only about one-quarter to three-quarters of an inch in diameter, take on a pink hue before dropping off to be replaced by the emerging leaves. The round fruits ripen to a bright red in late August or early September.

‘Ocean View’ seedlings should be planted at a depth of approximately two inches above the root collar on stable sand dunes and no deeper than the root collar on inland soils. Fertilization helps with good establishment and vigorous plant growth. Recommended spacing of plants varies with intended use: to provide a dense barrier of protective vegetation, seedlings should be placed about four to six feet apart, and when used inland for residential areas or wildlife plots, about six to eight feet apart.

The availability of this new cultivar gives gardeners in the Northeast an opportunity to enjoy a bit of native beach vegetation in their backyards without adding to their list of maintenance tasks. And if you don’t care to use the fruit yourself for jelly, wildlife will appreciate it.

References


For information on beach plum fruit crop development please visit our website: www.beachplum.cornell.edu See also Arnoldia 62 4, “Taming the Wild Beach Plum” by R. H. Uva.

Dr. Uva and Professor Whitlow have collaborated on the development of beach plum as a fruit crop for several years at Cornell University.