

# Sparkleberry



Sparkleberry (*Vaccinium arboreum*) is a small tree with big advantages for both wildlife and homeowners. Variously known as farkleberry or tree huckleberry, it is the only North American variety of the blueberry (*Vaccinium*) genus that can reach treelike dimensions. Its specific epithet, *arboreum*, is derived from the Latin word for tree. Common in dry woodlands throughout much of Florida, sparkleberry trees tolerate both wetness and moderate drought conditions.

It grows in a variety of soil and light conditions ranging from full sun to full shade, preferring well-drained, acidic to neutral soil. Another attractive feature for both homeowners and wildlife is that sparkleberry is usually free of pests and disease problems, reducing the hassle, expense, and danger of chemical applications.

Its artfully twisted trunk, covered with greyish brown outer bark, displays a pleasing mottled effect as thin strips peel off to reveal the smooth reddish brown inner bark. Although the trunk is somewhat contorted, sparkleberry trees can reach almost 30 feet height. The airy branches arch crookedly, creating a rounded crown where birds nest during the breeding season in its dense twisting branch system. Some species known to nest here are northern cardinal, brown thrasher, northern mockingbird, and blue jay. The sparkleberry provides wildlife with reliable cover in all seasons, as it bears its small, roundish leaves nearly year round. In fall, it is among our most attractive trees, as the leaves shift to pink to bright crimson to purple in hue.

Springtime (April - May) finds them literally covered with small, white, urn-shaped flowers, borne in profuse sprays, reminiscent of lilies-of-the-valley. Pollinators of several kinds, including butterflies, are attracted to the flowers, which in turn invite insect eating birds to the area. Once pollinated, the flowers produce 5-8 mm berries, which turn from green to a shiny black, similar to other blueberries. Although sparkleberries may be made into jam or jelly, they are not as flavourful to humans as they are to the many animals who seek them for nourishment. Sparkleberries are a favorite food of the eastern bluebird, which relies on berries for winter food, as well as other songbirds such as catbirds, Florida blue jay, tufted titmouse, and the great crested flycatcher. Bobwhite, turkey, and mammal species such as fox, racoon, opossum, deer, hog, and bear also incorporate sparkleberries in their diet.

Although the Sparkleberry is among our most resilient trees, it too can succumb to degradation of our native plant communities through development, and changes in land use. Although its requirements are modest, its importance to wildlife is large, and care should be taken that it remains a viable resident of natural systems. Recognition of its value as a landscape plant should help citizens bring life to their landscape, and provide hours of enjoyment as they watch wildlife harvest this small trees bounties in all seasons.

by Sue Blakeman

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