

## Myricaceae

### bayberry family

The 50 species of small trees and shrubs comprising the bayberries are all aromatic and wind-pollinated. Catkins are unisexual, comprising numerous tiny flowers. Flowers lack a perianth and often arise in axils of leafy bracts. Staminate catkins have flowers with 2–8 stamens. The ovaries each have a pair of carpels with two styles connate at the base. Fruit may be an achene, drupe or small nut. Simple leaves are arranged alternately along the stem. Distally, their margins may have a few teeth. Lower leaf surfaces are covered with shining resin dots. Our three species are low, freely-branching shrubs that bear nodulated roots. These house nitrogen-fixing actinomycetes.

#### Key to genera

- A. Leaves deeply, pinnately lobed, resembling fern fronds; bracts subtending the ovary 9, forming a burr-like fruit. *Comptonia*
- aa. Leaves merely toothed; bracts subtending the ovary 2–4, deciduous in fruit, so fruit not burr-like. B
  - B. Flowers appearing before the leaves, at the summit; fruit a nutlet with 2 winged bracts. *Myrica*
  - bb. Flowers appearing after the leaves expand, on the lower portions of the twigs, below the leaves; fruit globose and covered with white or gray wax. *Morella*

### ***Comptonia* L'Hér.**

#### **Sweetfern**

A monotypic genus, this colonial shrub spreads vegetatively by rhizomes. Pistillate catkins are subtended by bracts and bracteoles, persisting after maturity. Leaves are stipulate and pinnately lobed, rather than merely toothed.

***Comptonia peregrina* (L.) Coult.**  
**Sweetfern; comptonie voyageuse**



*Photo by Marian Munro*



*Photo by Ross Hall*

Leaves alternate and up to 10cm long, 1cm wide. Their margins are notched or lobed and slightly revolute. Petioles present or not. Olive-green staminate catkins measure to 3.5cm long. These are borne distally on the previous year's growth. Pistillate catkins of flowers are dark red, carried below the staminate ones. Fruit 1–2cm wide.

Catkins mature in May.

Adapted to infertile sandy or barren soil and full sun, associated with pines and wire birch habitat, and also colonizing in blueberry fields not properly managed by burning.

Common in Kings and Cumberland Counties, southwestward. Infrequent in Cape Breton.

NS to ON, south to KY and GA.

***Morella* Lour.**

**Bayberries**

Slow-growing dioecious colonial shrubs, with only a single species reaching NS. Typified by the glossy green leaves and best known for the pungent aroma. The waxy white fruits may be distilled to produce the familiar bayberry scent used in candles.

***Morella pensylvanica* (Mirb.) Kartesz  
(*Myrica p.* Mirb.)**

**Bayberry; cirier dr Pensylvanie**



*Photo by Marian Munro*

A colonial species with glossy green oblanceolate leaves, the margins have a few round teeth at the summit. More robust than the following shrub, it may reach 2–2.5m in height. Staminate and pistillate catkins are borne directly on last year's wood. The tiny pistillate catkins are only 1cm long. Fruits are globose nutlets borne in small clusters, attracting several songbird species. Entire plant is fragrant.



*Photo by Martin Thomas*

Flowers in June, later than sweet gale. Usually associated with coastal habitats in NS, in bogs, barrens or heavier soils.

Abundant in southwestern NS, scattered elsewhere.

NF to ON, south to NC.

***Myrica* L.**

Aromatic shrubs or trees, of the 50 worldwide species we have only a single species. Species are dioecious, with the fruit a nutlet.

***Myrica gale* L.**

**Sweet Gale**



*Photo by Sean Blaney*



*Photo by David Mazerolle*

A compact shrub, to 1.5m in height, generally it is freely-branching. Leaves are oblanceolate, 3–6cm long, nearly sessile and with their margins serrated only distally. Upper and lower surfaces may be finely or sparsely pubescent. Pistillate catkins are ovoid, 10–12mm long.

An early-flowering shrub, April to early June.

Fens, marshes and various riparian settings in acidic waters.

Common throughout.

NL to AK, south to OR; east coast south to NC and TN;  
Eurasia.