

# Florida Anise

*Illicium, Illicium floridanum, Ellis*  
(anise stinkbush, red bay, polecat-tree, purple anise, star anise, starbush)

By *Coleen Vansant*, Public Information Manager, Alabama Forestry Commission

**T**he aroma of this native plant was so pleasing to botanist William Bartram in the spring of 1778, that he saw fit to record his experience, *“Now I am come within the atmosphere of the Illicium groves, how reanimating is the fragrance! Every part of this plant above ground possesses an aromatic scent, but the large stillated pericarpe is the most fragrant part of it, which continually perspires an oleaginous sweat, as warm and vivific as cloves or mace.”*

Bartram was returning to Georgia from Mobile through the heart of the Alabama River Basin. According to his journal he was somewhere in the boundaries of the Creek Indian nation.

This large, handsome shrub grows 6 to 10 feet tall and can be as wide as 6 to 8 feet. It is an evergreen, resembling a bay, and is very fragrant when it blooms.

Its leaves are also aromatic, having a very strong odor similar to that of anise when crushed. They are dark green, thick, smooth, entire, elliptic, tapering at both ends, and 3 to 5 inches long with a lighter color below. They are clustered at the end of the limbs. The twigs are gray and angled.

The flowers are large, showy, red to maroon and are borne singly on long stalks, 1 to 2 inches across with numer-

## OF ALABAMA Plants



ous long thin petals that appear in the spring. A very rare and uncommon yellow variety grows wild only in Florida.

A white cultivar “alba” does exist and can be purchased from many nurseries. The bloom, appearing in April and May, grows on the end of a leafy shoot with 3 sepals and 30 to 40 narrow linear petals and numerous stamens. Some say the flowers smell like decaying fish while others find the smell very pleasant.

The fruit is a round flattened pie-like disc, 1-1½ inches in diameter, composed of pointed spreading valves which free the seed. The fruit is toxic to livestock.

The anise likes shade to partial shade, and you’ll quite often find it growing on the edges of swamps, creeks, and streams. It grows on the coastal plain, from Florida to Louisiana. It is abundant in a broken range across the central part of Alabama except in the extreme half of Baldwin and Mobile counties. It is cold tolerant.

The plant’s primary use is an ornamental, and it is gaining more and more favor with nurserymen and landscapers because of its desirable characteristics.

Alabama is home to the National Champion which also serves as the State Champion. Located in Perry County, it stands 29 feet high, has a crown spread of 20 feet, and has a circumference of 15 inches. Its total point value is 49. 🌿



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