



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*  
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# Red Bay

(*Persea borbonia*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

**R**ed bay is a handsome evergreen, multi-stemmed shrub, potentially becoming a medium-sized tree to about 60 feet tall. The leaves are alternate, to about 8 inches

long, tapered at both ends, leathery, dark green above; paler, with prominent veins below. Some of the leaves are nearly always deformed by unsightly galls, caused by chewing insects called red bay psyllids. The bark on twigs is dull green, becoming gray-brown, with deep, irregular furrows on trunks and large branches.

Red bay is native to the Southeastern coastal plain, from Maryland to Texas. In Alabama it is found in the southern half of the state on well-drained, sandy sites, but it is sometimes seen in moist places. A similar, closely related Southeastern species is swamp bay, *Persea palustris*, which differs from *Persea borbonia* by growing on wetter sites and having dense brownish hairs on the leaves and young twigs, longer fruit stalks (pedicels), and rust-colored leaf veins.

Both of our native red bays have been used historically in Southern cooking as excellent replacements for the related Mediterranean laurel bay, *Lauris nobilis*, the bay leaves of commerce. In fact, many Cajun cooks prefer the native red bays to season their red beans and rice and jambalaya. Traditionally, a small leafy branch is collected and hung in the kitchen to dry. Then, when bay leaves are needed for a recipe such as red beans, they are simply picked and dropped into the pot. Those branches look very attractive and “culinary” hanging in the kitchen, and they are a great indicator that you have found the lair of a good

cook! The *Perseas* belong to the distinguished laurel family, which also includes sassafras, cinnamon, avocados, and the invasive exotic camphortree, *Cinnamomum camphora*.

Red bay seldom grows large enough to be of much importance as a timber species, but the brownish red wood is hard, dense, and takes a high polish. It has been historically used in ship construction as trim and cabinetry for captains' cabins.

Both *Perseas* are host plants for the beautiful spicebush and palamedes swallowtail butterflies. Red bay trees provide forage for turkeys, quail, and many songbirds. White-tailed deer and black bears browse on the foliage and the small, oval, blue-black fruits that ripen in the fall.

An environmental disaster looms on the near horizon for our red bays. Laurel wilt, a new disease, is causing widespread, quickly expanding mortality of red bays and other species in the family *Lauraceae* in the Southeastern United States. This catastrophic, fatal disease is caused by an exotic fungus that is introduced into trees by an Asian ambrosia beetle which was discovered near Savannah, Georgia in 2002. No effective treatment or control has been developed, and it seems likely that our beautiful red bays, sassafras, and other members of the laurel family are destined to join the American chestnut as treasured native species that have been decimated by exotic diseases.

The Alabama Forestry Commission does not currently recognize a state champion red bay. The national champion *Persea borbonia* is 146 inches in circumference, 94 feet tall, with an average crown spread of 45 feet, in Hamilton, Florida. 🌳



Photo by Fred Nation