

Bayberry Candles, the Original “Green” Lighting

Burning a bayberry candle to the nub around the holidays is said to bring good luck throughout the coming year. Whether or not that is a 300-year-old custom, it is documented that bayberry candles were among the most prized candles in 18th century colonial America. Prior to oil lamps and electricity, a candle was the only alternative for illuminating work or entertainment after sunset. Unfortunately for 17th and 18th century colonists, the commonly used tallow candles were often more trouble than they were worth.

What colonists discovered – or learned – fairly soon after arriving on the eastern seaboard was that the wax on bayberries could be used to make a very desirable candle wax. The southern wax myrtle bush (*Myrica cerifera*) has a number of common names including bayberry and candleberry. It occurs from the Florida Keys north to New Jersey and while it favors wetlands and riverbanks, it is adaptable to many habitats and can tolerate salt spray near the coast. The genus name *Myrica* comes from the Greek “myrike” meaning fragrant, while the species “cerifera” means “wax-bearing.” Similar species occur in Europe but it was not until they arrived in the New World that Europeans learned how to boil the berries and skim the wax for candle making.



Berries of the Southern Waxmyrtle ©1997 Alice B. Russell, NC State University

There were four main types of candles available to 18th century colonists, with tallow candles being the most common and inexpensive and spermaceti or whale oil candles being the most expensive. The other two choices were beeswax or bayberry wax candles. Bayberry seems to have become the most popular because of its clear, more consistent light and its pleasant odor. One of the first written accounts of bayberry candles was in 1698 and exclaimed that instead of “stinking” they really do “perfume like incense.” A Virginian historian reported in 1705 that the process of making bayberry candles was a very “modern discovery.” Robert Beverly went on to report that:



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At the mouth of their rivers, all along upon the sea and bay and near many of their creeks and swamps grows the myrtle bearing a berry of which they make a hard brittle wax of a curious green color, which by refining becomes almost transparent. Of this they make candles that are never greasy to the touch nor melt in the hottest weather. Neither does the snuff of these ever offend the smell like that of the tallow candle; but instead of being disagreeable if an accident puts it out, it yields a pleasant fragrance to all that are in the room.

The utility of the bayberry to the colonists went far beyond candle making. The plant contains several organic compounds and has a long history of medicinal use. Since the early 1700s, bayberry has been used to treat convulsions, colic, diarrhea and other ailments and it was commonly prescribed until the 1920s. Perhaps of most relief to the colonists was the discovery that the crushed leaves serve as a mosquito repellent when rubbed on the skin and have a very pleasant odor besides. Those same repellent properties were



Leaves of the Southern Waxmyrtle ©1997 Alice B. Russell, NC State University

found to repel fleas and other insects, resulting in the custom of placing branches of bayberry leaves under everyone's bed. Bayberry leaves were also put in the flour bin to repel moths.

So the bayberry was highly regarded before – and long after – its candle making properties were discovered. It was appreciated by the colonists as an aid to protecting both body and home from pests and illness, contributing to their health and peace of mind.

The bayberries were harvested in late fall, with the candle making occurring shortly before the New Year. It could very well be that the gift of a newly made bayberry candle not only provided consistent, smoke-free lighting for the recipient, it also would have carried the same best wishes for their health and well-being that the bayberry plant itself had come to represent.



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Although burning a bayberry candle to welcome in 2010 does not quite carry the same significance as it did in 1710, it does offer an opportunity to contemplate how things have changed over the past 300 years. Burning a bayberry candle to the nub also could carry on its pleasant fragrance some of that hope and reassurance for the coming year that was so appreciated by the colonists.

Real bayberry candles can be found at AdirondackCraft.com and at fine candle shops everywhere.

This short history of the bayberry candle was developed by [Tim Holmes](#), research director at [Holmes & Associates](#), with information from the following references:

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