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Carissa macrocarpa: Natal Plum[1]

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https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/

IFAS Assessment

Central, North, South

Not a problem species (un-documented)

Not considered a problem species at this time. May be recommended by IFAS. Reassessed every 10 years.

view assessment

This Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ publication is part of a series originally written by Edward F. Gilman.
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Introduction

Dwarf natal plum (*Carissa macrocarpa*) is an evergreen shrub that is known for its attractive foliage, flowers, and fruits. This dense, spreading plant will reach a height and spread of 2 to 20 feet, but generally remains on the more compact side (Figures 1 and 2). The natal plum has small, leathery, ovoid leaves that are dark green in color accompanied by sharp, bifurcate (forked) spines about 1½ inches long (Figure 3). White, star-shaped flowers that are 2 inches wide appear on the plant in the spring (Figure 4). The fragrant flowers are solitary and have overlapping petals. Bright red fruits are about 2 inches long and ripen throughout the year (Figure 5). The plum-shaped berries are edible and occasionally used for jellies and preserves. As is characteristic of plants in the *Apocynaceae* plant family (relatives of milkweed species), twigs bleed a milky sap when they are injured. Natal plum is versatile and may be used in a variety of settings in the landscape, including as a border or foundation plant, as a hedge or to add privacy as a screening plant, or may be used in containers or bonsaied.



Figure 1. Full form, manicured—*Carissa macrocarpa*: natal plum.
Credit: © Jody, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 2. Full form, natural—*Carissa macrocarpa*: natal plum.
Credit: © Craig Peter, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 3. Leaf—*Carissa macrocarpa*: natal plum.
Credit: © migsgreenworld, some rights reserved (CC BY) via iNaturalist



Figure 4. Flower—*Carissa macrocarpa*: natal plum.
Credit: Ryan Fessenden



Figure 5. Fruit—*Carissa macrocarpa*: natal plum.
Credit: © suzette35, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist

General Information

Scientific name: *Carissa macrocarpa*

Previous name(s): *Carissa grandiflora* (synonym)

Pronunciation: kuh-RISS-uh mack-roe-KAR-puh

Common name(s): natal plum

Family: *Apocynaceae*

Plant type: shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11B (Figures 6 and 7)

USDA Hardiness Zones 9B-11A

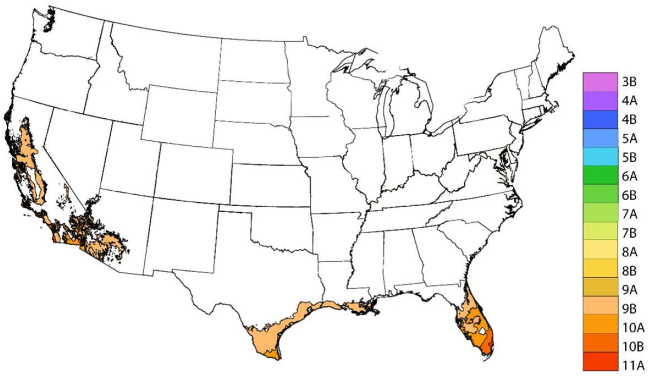


Figure 6. Shaded area represents potential planting zone—USDA Hardiness Zones 9B–11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

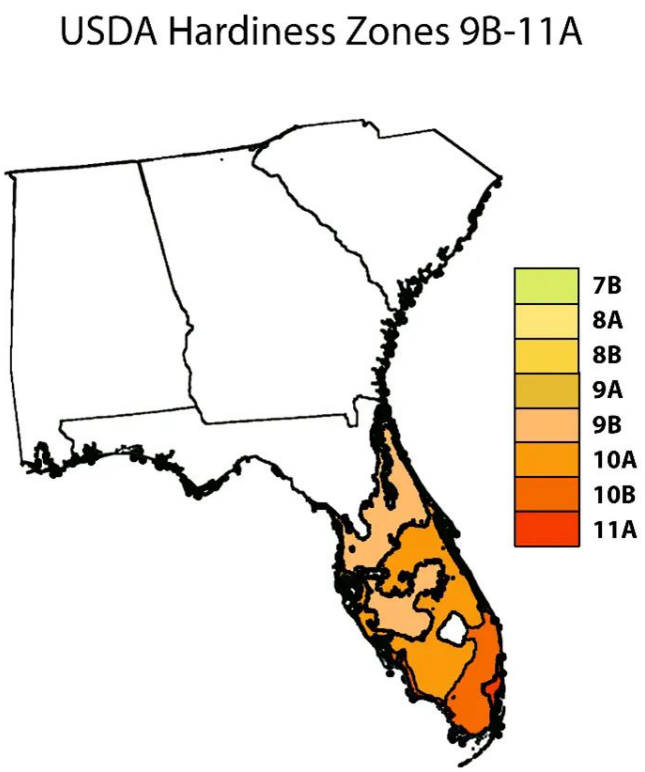


Figure 7. Shaded area represents potential planting zone in the SE Region—USDA Hardiness Zones 9B–11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

Planting month for zone 9: year-round

Planting month for zones 10 and 11: year-round

Origin: native to Africa

Invasive potential: not considered a problem species at this time and may be recommended by UF/IFAS faculty (reassess in 10 years)

Uses: bonsai; border; mass planting; container or above-ground planter; hedge or screen; foundation plant; coastal landscaping; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); medium-sized parking lot islands (100–200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size)

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 2 to 20 feet

Spread: 2 to 20 feet

Plant habit: round; spreading

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: terminal spine

Leaf shape: ovate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristic: summer flowering; pleasant fragrance

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: 1 to 3 inches

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristic: suited for human consumption; persists on the plant; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; spines present

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun; plant grows in partial shade

Soil tolerances: acidic; alkaline; clay; sand; loam; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerances: good

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: not applicable

Winter interest: evergreen foliage

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Use and Management

Natal plum grows well in full sun to light shade on a well-drained sandy soil. Roots can rot if soil is poorly drained. It is highly drought and salt tolerant, requiring no additional irrigation once established. This plant may be used in a variety of ways in the landscape. It has armored stems, making it an effective privacy hedge or screen. This plant can be pruned to maintain a more manicured aesthetic. Natal plum is also suited as a foundation plant or may be used in containers. This plant may range from 2 to 20 feet in height and width. Pruning may be required to keep this plant within bounds. Pruning should occur after spring following the end of its flowering season. Remove no more than the top third of the shrub and ensure that the top of the plant is narrower than the bottom to allow light to adequately reach all the foliage. Wear protective clothing when performing maintenance on this plant.

There are several cultivars of natal plum available with various growth forms, variegated foliage, and larger fruits. ‘Boxwood Beauty’, ‘Nana’, and ‘Emerald Blanket’ are cultivars that are commonly referred to as dwarf natal plum as they are more compact in size with a growth habit more like a groundcover than shrub. ‘Nana’ reaches only up to 1½ feet tall.

Design Considerations

Natal plum brings year-round design value with glossy, deep-green foliage, a dense, rounded form, and bold defensive texture from forked thorns, accented by starry white flowers and plum-red fruit. Thriving in full sun and well-drained soil, it’s exceptionally salt and heat tolerant, making it ideal for coastal sites, hot foundations, informal or clipped hedges under windows, and massing on slopes; avoid poorly drained spots and placements near high-traffic paths, poolside, or play areas.

To soften the natal plum's bold texture, pair it with fine-leafed plants like the hazy pink Muhly Grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) or cascading dune sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*). Create architectural contrast by placing it near upright, spiky forms such as Agave, Yucca, or Bird of Paradise (*Strelitzia* spp.). For color, use the cool blue of plumbago (*Plumbago auriculata*) for a soft counterpoint, or create a vibrant scheme with firecracker plant (*Russelia equisetiformis*). In coastal settings, it combines naturally with other salt-tolerant natives like seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*) and coontie (*Zamia* integrifolia) to form a resilient and attractive planting.

Pests and Diseases

Pest issues include Florida red scale. Disease issues include foliar bacteria and root rot.

[1] This document is FPS108, one of a series of the Department of Environmental Horticulture, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date October 1999. Revised March 2023 and April 2026. Visit the Ask IFAS website at https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/ for the currently supported version of this publication. *To learn more about creating and maintaining attractive landscapes that protect Florida's water and natural resources, visit ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/*.

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