

Where to See Mountain Laurel

You'll find mountain laurel blooming in uplands throughout most of Virginia from May well into June along trails, roadsides, at the edges of fields and pastures, all along power lines and railroad rights of way. Its range extends throughout the East, from Southeastern Maine south along the coastal plain and in the mountains of Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi. According to the *Atlas of the Virginia Flora* (1992), mountain laurel may be found in all but a few counties in the Commonwealth, absent only from a few counties in the lower Piedmont.

KALMIA
LATIFOLIA L.



Late summer wildflower walks sponsored by chapters of the Virginia Native Plant Society often pass through mountain laurel habitat. Check your local newspaper for notices of walks in your area, or write VNPS at the address below for information.

Catharine Tucker and Nancy Arrington, Authors
Drawings by Barbara Stewart

Gardeners should be aware that wild collected mountain laurel is still showing up in nurseries. Plants are usually balled and burlapped with trunks that have been sawed off to stimulate new growth. Don't buy them! Inform the nurseryman that these plants have been illegally collected and encourage him to stock nursery propagated plants. For a list of retail sources of nursery propagated plants and responsibly collected seed, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the address below.

Virginia Native Plant Society
P.O. Box 844
Annandale, VA 22003

1994 Virginia Wildflower of the Year

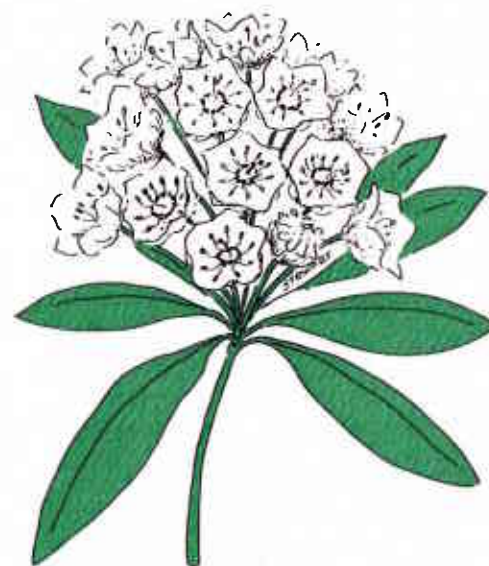
Mountain Laurel
Kalmia latifolia L.



Virginia Native Plant Society
Conserving Wild Flowers and Wild Places
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Mountain Laurel



An evergreen shrub with a dense rounded crown and crooked branches, mountain laurel is a member of the Heath family (Ericaceae). The dark brown bark tinged with red becomes flaky in long strips on the older stems, but is smooth on newer wood. New growth, both twigs and leaves, is usually fuzzy. The mature leaves are alternate (rarely in threes), leathery, oblong, about 3 to 4 inches long, with smooth margins tapering to both tip and short petiole. The upper surface is dark green and very glossy with a yellow midrib, while the lower surface is a lighter yellow-green.

"Calico bush" is another common name for mountain laurel because of the pink trimmed waxy white blossoms. Flowers are borne on one-inch pedicels and produced in terminal clusters or corymbs four to six inches across. Buds are conical, fluted and deeper pink. When the campanulate flowers open, the corollas appear as five-sided, white inverted parasols about an inch across with pink dots and a wavy pink line in the center. The ten stamens in each flower have anthers buried in individual "pockets" in the corolla completing the illusion of parasols with dainty ribs.

Mark Catesby discovered mountain laurel during his travels in the Carolinas and Virginia and introduced it to Europe in 1726. But Peter Kalm, a Finnish botanist sent to the New World to collect plants for Linnaeus, was the first to study the genus. The teacher named the genus for his student, thus giving mountain laurel the Latin name, *Kalmia latifolia*. The specific name means, "wide leaf," a character which differentiates this from five other species of *Kalmia*, all residents of the New World.

It was Kalm who discovered the poisonous properties of the foliage when some sheep belonging to the expedition in which he travelled almost died after browsing the leaves. "Lambkill" is another common name applies to this plant. Horses are susceptible, but deer seem not to be so seriously affected. However, deer do not appear to prefer it, browsing this only when little else is available. Honey made from mountain laurel is also believed to be poisonous.

... In the Wild

To find mountain laurel in the wild, watch for the distinctive shiny evergreen foliage under hardwoods on the coastal plain, along the rivers in cool, acid but well-drained areas, especially along the Blue Ridge or westward. Along openings created by trails and roads and in the interstate medians, these plants often form a glossy green wall at the edge of the forest.

Usually six to ten feet high, these handsome shrubs may reach twenty to thirty feet in height and form tangled patches so dense that they are difficult to walk or even crawl through. That characteristic plus the shiny smooth appearance of large patches earned them the names "laurel hell" and "laurel slick" from early settlers. Where lumbering operations or fires removed the canopy trees, the mountain laurel often forms almost pure stands. In bloom, the "laurel slicks" of the highlands become "pink beds."

The plants tolerate a range of soils from sandy areas to shallow, rocky mountain soil, and can tolerate generally dry sites. On richer sites, the plants will be more robust and taller. Where winter wind and ice effects are

severe, plants may be shorter with many multi-branched stems.

Picking the flowers for bouquets will not work well unless the stems may be placed in water immediately. Branches are sometimes cut to use as Christmas decorations, though this practice is discouraged in the wild. Finding dry capsules, split like orange sections, in the winter is fun for children. Watching for bees to trigger the stamens or trying to produce this effect is amusing, also. Small seed-eating birds perch precariously on small stems and retrieve seeds. In winter bouquets, branches with dry capsules may provide both textural contrast and color.

Because of the poisonous properties, no part of the plant should be used for internal medicinal purposes, nor should the leaves or stems be chewed. The powdered leaves mixed with lard have historically been used to treat skin rashes and infections. Plants are not easily transplanted and should not be dug from the wild, but obtained from readily available nursery stock.

.. In the Garden

Mountain laurel is a superb landscape plant with year round interest. Propagation difficulties have kept this wonderful native shrub out of our gardens, but that is changing as a result of recent breeding programs at universities and nurseries. Many of these exciting new cultivars are extremely easy to propagate by cuttings, and others are being produced by tissue culture. Nurseries are beginning to carry cultivars such as "Sara" with dark pink flowers, and "Bullseye" with deep purple buds opening to white flowers with a cinnamon purple band. Washington Evergreen Nursery (P.O. Box 388, Leicester, NC 28748, catalog \$2) carries almost thirty cultivars and selections.

Like other members of the family Ericaceae, mountain laurel needs acid soil and excellent drainage. Though it grows naturally in sites ranging from dry, rocky slopes to moist stream banks, these locations are always well drained. Pine bark is a good soil amendment and can also

be used for a mulch to keep the shallow roots slightly moist and cool. Plants will grow in shade, but flowering will be better with at least three or four hours of sun.

Under cultivation, mountain laurel stays around six to ten feet tall and is an excellent broadleaf evergreen for both formal and naturalistic settings. Several plants can be massed to provide a dense hedge or screen. Single plants are attractive accents in shrub borders, or it can be mixed with ferns and wildflowers in woodland gardens. Mountain laurel is a fine low-maintenance plant for a naturalistic garden where it can grow unchecked into the picturesque form associated with plants in the wild. In formal or structured gardens, it can be kept compact with light pruning after flowering. Plants that have become tall and leggy can be severely pruned to stimulate dense new growth. Remove dead blossoms before seed forms for better flowering the following year.