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Above: The rose myrtle produces peach blossom lookalike flowers that can potentially be used as a peach or plum blossom substitute for heralding the Lunar New Year in the tropics.

Not a plant that everybody is familiar with, the rose myrtle is a delightful plant that produces peach blossom lookalike flowers that can potentially be used as a peach or plum blossom substitute for heralding the Lunar New Year in the tropics. Besides having ornamental value, this woody shrub also has medicinal properties. A couple of rose myrtle plants will surely brighten up a spot in any medicinal garden where they are grown.

Like many other plants, the rose myrtle is also known by a number of other names, which include Downy Myrtle, Hill Gooseberry and Ceylon Hill Cherry. Its Chinese name is “Tao Jin Niang” (桃金娘). The rose myrtle is a member of the myrtle family, *Myrtaceae*, which a couple of useful and edible plants are also members, including the guava (*Psidium guayava*), water apple (*Syzygium jambos*) and the eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus* spp.).

Botanically known as *Rhodomyrtus tomentosa*, the genus name of the rose myrtle is derived from Greek words, namely, ‘rhodon’ meaning red and ‘myrtos’ meaning myrtle, which refers to red flowers that are commonly produced by plants in this genus. There are two varieties of the rose myrtle. *Rhodomyrtus tomentosa* var. *tomentosa* is the primarily lowland variety that is found in South-East Asia, southern China and Indo-China and occurs up to an altitude of 300 m. The variety *parviflora*, on the other hand, is cooler-growing and found mainly in India and Sri Lanka. This latter variety is found in montane woodlands and grassland with altitudes of 1800 to 2700 m.



Above: The rose myrtle fruits are green at first and as they ripen, they turn dark purple. Snatch them before the birds do so!

Although usually sold in local nurseries as a small shrub, the rose myrtle is capable of growing into a small tree of about 2 meters tall. Its leaves are oval in shape and has a prominent midrib with two veins that flank the midrib on both sides. Each leaf is smooth to touch on the upperside while velvety to feel on the reverse. The young shoots and foliage are silvery white and renders this plant a suitable candidate for a silver garden. The crushed leaves have medicinal uses and are used to dress wounds in Indonesia.



Above: How to identify the rose myrtle when there are no flowers or fruits to assist you – the leaves are oval with rounded leaf tips. The upperside of the leaves are green and smooth to touch while the underside has a velvety feel. Three veins run prodominately through each leaf lengthwise.

Produced all year round, the pretty, five-petalled flowers are borne between the leaf axils, in clusters of two or three and sometimes singly. Each flower measures up to about 3 cm in diameter. When freshly opened, the flowers of the rose myrtle are a rich pink in colour, which gradually turn to an almost white colour before fading away. In Hawaii, flowers are used to make lei.

This shrub produces edible purple globose berries that are about 1/2 inch across that bears some resemblance to the pomegranate fruit. The purple pulp of the ripe rose myrtle fruit is juicy and sweet to taste and is popular with birds and children. Unripe fruits have green skin and taste slightly astringent. The fruits have been reported to be used to make jams or jellies but a large number of fruits are required due to their small size. Medicinally, the fruits are used to treat dysentery and diarrhoea in Malaysia.

The rose myrtle grows wild and is also cultivated in Southeast Asia, India, Sri Lanka, and southern China. In the past, this shrub used to be a common sight in Singapore, growing wild in wastelands, often with impoverished, sandy soils. These were probably wiped out due to rapid urbanisation. Nowadays, one can perhaps only see this shrub in areas where they have been planted by the National Parks Board, such as, in front of the Rangers' Station at Bukit Kalang and near the Boardwalk at Changi Jetty. Some can be seen in the Singapore Botanic Gardens.



Above: The small, purple globose berries of the rose myrtle are juicy and sweet to taste when ripe and are popular with birds and children.

At present, the rose myrtle is not a nuisance in Singapore. However, it has been reported to become an invasive, fire-resistant weed that is difficult to eradicate in places like Florida, Hawaii and the French Polynesia where it was first introduced as an ornamental plant. In these areas, rose myrtle formed dense thickets that have displaced native flora and are spread by seed drop by animals such as, birds and mammals, which consume the fruits.

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The rose myrtle is a fuss-free plant with a moderate growth rate. One can follow the general cultural requirements that you would for any flowering shrub or fruit tree when it comes to growing the rose myrtle. It is a good candidate for growing by a busy urbanite.

A plant that enjoys sunshine, the best location to grow a rose myrtle is one where it can receive full sun, if not, semishade. Because the rose myrtle starts to flower and fruit when it is relatively small, it is a shrub that can be grown in a container well-suited for a highrise garden. Ensure it can receive at least 6 hours of direct sunshine as this amount of sunshine is required by the rose myrtle plant to thrive. The shrub appears to flower more profusely during the cooler and wetter season of the year in Singapore.

This shrub is relatively undemanding with regards to soil conditions. It can be grown in clayey soil that is commonly found in Singapore and can tolerate waterlogged conditions. Fertile and well-draining soil is preferred to promote the growth of an extensive and healthy root system. A layer of well rotted organic compost put on top of the soil will help to conserve moisture in the soil as well as act as a source of nutrients for the rose myrtle.

Regular pruning is the key to ensure one's plant stays according to the preferred height and shape. This operation will result in more sideshoots, paving the way to a bushier and compact plant. Growing the rose myrtle in a container can keep the plant in a manageable size. Being a woody plant, the rose myrtle is a good candidate to consider for bonsai where it can be trained into an interesting shape and form.

The rose myrtle is easily be propagated through stem-cuttings, which is a faster method compared to raising from seeds. Materials that resulted from a pruning procedure can be used for propagation.

Finally, the rose myrtle is a low maintenance plant that is seldom bothered by pests and diseases. At most is an occasional light infestation of mealy bugs which can be easily removed by dabbing with rubbing alcohol or sprayed with a neem oil solution made up according to the manufacturer's instructions.

References

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