Carissa grandiflora Natal Plum, Common Carissa¹

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Introduction

Carissa is one of Florida’s and California’s very best seaside shrubs (Fig. 1). This moderately fast-growing, evergreen shrub has lustrous, leathery, rich green, oval leaves and spines along its branches. It is hard to find a plant with darker green leaves. Flowers are somewhat fragrant, white, and star-shaped. The bright red, edible, plum-shaped fruit tastes like cranberries and can be used to make jam. Flowers and fruit are quite showy and are often borne on the plant simultaneously.

General Information

Scientific name: Carissa grandiflora
Pronunciation: kuh-RISS-uh gran-dif-FLOR-uh
Common name(s): natal plum, common carissa
Family: Apocynaceae
Plant type: ground cover
USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11 (Fig. 2)
Planting month for zone 9: year round
Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round
Origin: not native to North America
Uses: bonsai; foundation; screen; border; mass planting; container or above-ground planter; fruit; espalier; ground cover; superior hedge; 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

Figure 1. Natal plum.

Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.
Carissa grandiflora Natal Plum, Common Carissa

**Description**

Height: 6 to 10 feet  
Spread: 4 to 10 feet  
Plant habit: spreading; upright  
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

**Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: not particularly showy; typically multi trunked or clumping stems  
Current year stem/twig color: green  
Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

**Culture**

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun  
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; acidic; alkaline; loam  
Drought tolerance: high  
Soil salt tolerances: good  
Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

**Other**

Roots: usually not a problem  
Winter interest: no special winter interest  
Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding  
Invasive potential: not known to be invasive  
Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

**Use and Management**

Natal plum will tolerate a variety of soils and exposures and only needs light pruning. Useful as a screen or hedge, it should not be planted too closely to walkways where its large, forked thorns can injure passersby. It makes a nice, full foundation shrub. While it thrives in full sun, natal plum can adapt to fairly heavy shade and requires only moderate watering and fertilization. Plant on three to six-foot centers for a hedge or mass planting, closer for the compact cultivars. Dwarf cultivars such as ‘Green Carpet’, ‘Horizontalis’, and ‘Prostrata’ make excellent groundcovers.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings.

**Pests and Diseases**

Natal plum is relatively pest-free.

Natal plum is susceptible to root rot when plants are overwatered.