Bayberry

If you live in the mountains or piedmont of Virginia, going to the coast is always associated with encountering a different flora, and the plants which make the strongest impression change with the season. In the late fall, the plant of which you will be most aware along the coastal plain, around swamps, on islands like Assateague and through sand dune areas like Back Bay, will be the bayberry, Myrica. Flowers will be long since over since they bloom in midsummer, but the tough, shrubby bushes will be covered with bluish, waxy berries — smelling as only a good candle should smell.

The Myricaceae or wax-myrtle family is a small family, closely allied with the Betulaceae or beech family, distributed throughout the temperate regions of the world. Sweet Gale, bayberry or candleberry, wax myrtle and sweet fern are the main members in the eastern United States. Leaves are stiff, alternate and aromatic. The flowers are unisexual and borne on axillary, catkin-like spikes, and the fruits of the female flowers are small, hard, waxy drupes.

No old-fashioned Virginia Christmas is complete without dark green bayberry candles, and although synthetic perfumes are sometimes used nowadays, candles made with the real, waxy fruits of bayberry are much the nicest. The candles burn with a bluish flame and when extinguished, leave a lasting, fragrant aroma.

The leaves of wax myrtles can be used as a substitute for the regular bay leaves, put as a flavoring in soups and stews, although these are normally leaves of the bay laurel, Laurus nobilis, a member of the Lauraceae. Leaves of Sweet Gale, Myrica Gale, can be made into tea which is sometimes used to alleviate colds and catarrh, although, as Fernald says, “it is popular... if not always efficacious!” Sweet fern, Comptonia, has yellow, oily nutlets which are a popular “nibble” when they are young, in June and July. The approved method of extracting the nutlets — with the tip of the finger — is one guaranteed to keep the fingernails stained indelibly yellow throughout the season.

Bayberry leaves will stay on the bushes through the winter, and, unless the storms become too violent, there will be some berries on the twigs right up until spring when the new flower buds form. If you do not have the time to indulge in boiling down the fruits to make candles, you can at least grab a handful of leaves and berries and crush them into a bowl in a corner of the house. Both leaves and berries are highly aromatic, and the fragrance will give the house an air of the Old South as nothing else will.