

RHODOMYRTUS TOMENTOSA (AIT.) HASSK.

Myrtaceae/Myrtle Family

Common Names: Downy rose myrtle, downy myrtle, hill gooseberry, hill guava
Synonymy: *Rhodomyrtus tomentosa* (Ait.) Wight, *R. parviflora* Alston
Origin: Tropical Asia

Botanical Description: Evergreen shrub to 2 m (6 ft) tall, with dense, short, soft hairs on young stems. Leaves opposite, simple, entire, elliptic-oval, to 7 cm (3 in) long, glossy green above, densely soft-hairy below (tomentose), with 3 main veins from blade base. Flowers rose-pink, to 2.5 cm (1 in) across, in one- to few-flowered clusters at leaf axils; 5 sepals, hairy; 5 petals; many stamens, with pink filaments. Fruit a globose, few-seeded berry to 1.3 cm (0.5 in) across, dark purple, with sweet, aromatic flesh.

Ecological Significance: A principal weed in Hawaii and Malaysia, and a common weed in Thailand (Holm *et al.* 1979). Introduced to Hawaii around 1920 (Degener 1963), where it formed impenetrable thickets on Kauai and Hilo by the 1950s (Hosaka and Thistle 1954). Introduced to Florida before 1924 for ornament and edible fruit (Gordon and Thomas 1997). An early escapee from cultivation, forming extensive thickets near Orlando, Bradenton, Oneco, Bonita Springs, Naples, and Estero (Morton 1976). Readily invades pinelands, displacing native vegetation with dense one-species thickets in the understory (T. Pernas, National Park Service, and D. F. Austin, Florida Atlantic University, 1995 personal communications). Threatens to become worse than Brazilian pepper in central Florida (J. Layne, Archbold Biological Station, 1996 personal communication to D. F. Austin). Reported now from natural areas in Sarasota, Lee, Collier, Highlands, Palm Beach, and Martin counties (EPPC 1996).

Distribution: Found in Florida as far north as Pasco County on the west coast; documented by herbarium specimens from the counties already mentioned plus Hillsborough, Manatee, Charlotte, and DeSoto counties (Wunderlin *et al.* 1995). Native from India to China, south to the Phillippines (Bailey and Bailey 1976). By 1950s, widespread in tropics and subtropics to 2,400 m (8,000 ft) elevations (Hosaka and Thistle 1954).



Fruit, leaves

DOWNY ROSE MYRTLE

Life History: Will withstand several degrees of frost; is not particular as to soil (Bailey and Bailey 1976). Thrives in moist soil when young (Morton 1971a). Will tolerate salt of coastal soils, but sensitive to heavy salt spray and overwash (Menninger 1964). Blooms profusely, abundantly in spring (Morton 1971a, Menninger 1964). Fruits likened to huckleberries, but with thicker, richer juice, good for jelly (Stennis 1931). Seeds probably dispersed by birds and mammals.



Flowers



In pineland, Charlotte County