



Magnificent Mountain Laurels

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Driving up Route 84 on my way home from work, there is a lake on my right (Morey Pond, I believe) that right now is fringed in mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). The pale pink to white blossoms light up the darker overhead woods and are reflected in the water making for a scene fit for a painting. I'm guessing that's what 3000 women also saw, back in 1907, and that lovely sight had them pressing Connecticut's General Assembly to adopt mountain laurel as the Connecticut state flower.



Mountain laurels at edge of woodland. Photo by dmp2020.

Mountain laurel is a broad-leaved evergreen shrub growing from 5 to 15 feet or more and native to the East Coast from southern Maine to northern Florida and west to Indiana and Louisiana. It is a very handsome plant with dark green, glossy, elliptical leaves that are from 2 to 5 inches long and $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1.5 inches wide. Plants are hardy in our predominant hardiness zone 5 and even in protected parts of zone 4. Two closely related species also found in New England are sheep

laurel (*K. angustifolia*) and bog laurel (*K. polifolia*). The species name, *Kalmia*, was created by Linnaeus after receiving samples from Finnish explorer and botanist, Peter Kalm.

Preferred habitat is in part shade with a cool, moist but well-drained acidic soil of a pH of 5 to 5.5. Naturally, they occur along the edges of woodlands, on rocky slopes, and in parts of the forests that have thinned allowing sunlight to enter. Thriving colonies may form dense thickets. While tolerant of deeper shade, mountain laurel plants tend to get leggy and flowering is limited. When planted in full sun, especially in exposed areas, the foliage tends to more of a yellowish green.

In its wild form, mountain laurel trunks are gnarled and twisted. Its wood has been used for furniture, clocks, rails and Native Americans made spoons from it, hence the reason it is sometimes referred to as spoonwood.

Mountain laurel flowers are quite intriguing. They are mostly hexagonal in shape and are produced in 4 to 6-inch clusters at branch tips. The color of the native species ranges from light pink to white. Depending on the weather, they may last 2 weeks or more.



Mountain laurels lovely hexagonal flowers. Photo by dmp2020.

Bumble bees are the primary pollinators of mountain laurel. Flowers have a curious way of dispensing pollen. As the flowers develop, the filament (stem) of the male stamens are bent and under tension. An insect landing on the flower will cause the stamen to be released flinging pollen onto the insect as well as neighboring flowers. If no pollinators are present, mountain

laurel can self-pollinate. Small brown seed containing capsules form as the flowers fade. Each plant may produce thousands of seeds each year.

While not everyone has room in their yards for the more rangier species, there are a number of wonderful cultivars to choose from. Many were bred by Dr. Richard Jaynes of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in Hamden. Some cultivars were bred for their small size and compactness while others were developed with a more expansive color range. 'Firecracker' only reaches 3 feet in height and has notable red buds that open white and change to a light pink color. 'Elf' is the same size but with pure white flowers. 'Minuet' is another dwarf with white flowers that have cherry red markings and margins. 'Peppermint' reaches 10 feet and produces flowers with red stripes that come out from the center making the blossoms reminiscent of peppermint candies.

Mountain laurels do have a few problems, mostly with leaf blights. Injuries are usually more cosmetic than harmful to the plant and vary depending on cultivar, cultivation techniques and environmental conditions. Site plants in part but not deep shade, water during times of drought, rake up and fallen diseased leaves and fertilize once a year to keep plants thriving. Do note that all parts of the plant are poisonous.

Consider these beautiful native plants for woodland gardens or foundation plantings. Their attractive foliage, flowers and bark make for all season interest.

For questions about growing mountain laurel or on any home or garden topic, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in CT, at (877) 486-6271, visit us at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.