

HOME GARDEN SECTION

Bignay tree requires plenty of space as shown by this specimen at Federal Experiment Station, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico.

Florida Currant Tree

Antidesma Provides Shade And Fruit

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OF THE GREAT ARRAY OF MISCELLANEOUS, or minor, tropical and subtropical fruits which have been introduced into South Florida, few can compare with the tree-currants, or *Antidesma* species, from the standpoint of both beauty and utility.

There are more than 140 members of the genus growing wild in the tropics of the old world and, of the several which have been tried here, two are outstanding, the bignay, *Antidesma bunius*, which is native from India to Australia and the more recently introduced Herbert River cherry, *Antidesma dallachyanum*, native to Queensland and northern Australia where it and other local species are referred to collectively as "currant-trees."

Our principal species, the bignay, was introduced into the United States from the Philippines by O. W. Barrett in 1906 and scattered trees have done well throughout South Florida. A famed and magnificent specimen has fruited for many years at the Coconut Grove home of the late Dr. David Fairchild, the venerable plant explorer, who was enthusiastic about the fruit and encouraged its use for jelly-making. Ten years ago in his book, "Garden Islands of the Great East," he reported that Mrs. Helen Letchworth, well-known preserver of tropical fruit products, had gathered from his tree in one season 22 bushels of fruit yielding 72 gallons of juice.

Mrs. Letchworth and others who have made the so-called "antidesma" jelly for sale or for home use have found it a popular item. Fully equal in taste appeal to the favored red currant jelly, it could be widely marketed if an adequate supply were available.

In the past, seedling trees have disappointed many eager growers. Some prove to be non-fruited males, and female trees grown from seed may not bear for a number of years. Now, however, both grafted and air-layered trees can be purchased and specimens of the latter produced spectacular crops when only three years in the field at the Subtropical Experiment Station and less than shoulder-high. The bignay, however, is not a shrub nor a small tree and it must be allowed adequate room. It will, in time, reach a height of 30 feet or more, with a spread nearly as great, and its branches may droop to the ground with their burden of berries.

The ripening season is a long one, extending from late summer through fall and winter, since some trees flower much later than others. With proper selection of plants from trees of known bearing habit, a grower could be assured of a six-month harvest. The most attractive trees when in fruit are those which do not ripen all the berries in each cluster at one time. The variegated clusters, with fruits turning white, then

bright-red and finally dark-purple, are exceedingly decorative. The presence of some unripe as well as ripe fruits is also an advantage in making tart jelly.

Less familiar, even to tropical fruit enthusiasts in this area, is the second species mentioned, *Antidesma dallachyanum*, the Herbert River cherry. It is a smaller, more compact and upright tree and produces shorter clusters of much larger, grapelike fruits, which usually ripen uniformly. This species seems at present to have a shorter fruiting season but, when more trees are planted and in bearing, greater seasonal variation may be evident.

While the berries of both species, especially the bignay, have relatively little flesh and, therefore, are not classifiable as desert fruits, they are commonly eaten out-of-hand in their native lands and they yield not only superb jelly and jam but flavorful juice and sirup for cold drinks, also an excellent wine. Dietetically, the fruits are rated as good sources of calcium and contain a fair amount of iron.

The new home-owner in Florida need have no nostalgia for the currant and grape jellies of his home state if he will grow a currant-tree, and it may be hoped that tropical tree-currant products will reach more and more pantry shelves in the North.



Three-year-old air layered bignay at experiment station near Homestead has impressive crop of fruit. Checking it are Prof. Clery Salazar of University of Puerto Rico and Dr. Bruce Ledin, Subtropical Experiment Station.



Branches of the bignay, *Antidesma bunius*, are heavily laden with multi-colored fruit clusters which are decorative and good for making jelly.



The Herbert River cherry, *Antidesma dallachyanum*, has larger, fleshier fruits than the bignay (left) and clustered fruits ripen uniformly.