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**Wildflower Spot – February 2012**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## SWAMP BAY

*Persea palustris*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This medium-sized tree is evergreen, with strongly aromatic, narrow, dark green leaves, wedge-shaped at the base. Somewhat leathery, the leaves are shiny on top and pale beneath with rusty-brown fuzz. The twigs are angled, and densely rusty-hairy. In May and June small flowers are borne in clusters on hairy stalks, producing small, dark blue to black roundish berries on red stems. Bark is dark reddish and deeply grooved.

Swamp Bay is a tree of swamps and wet woods in the southern coastal states. In Virginia, it occurs in only 12 counties of the Coastal Plain. A large champion tree grows in a residential neighborhood in Newport News with a circumference of 155 inches, and 55 feet in height. The flowers bloom May to June.

With an aroma similar to that of the European true laurel or bay tree, *Laurus nobilis*, the spicy leaves can be used to flavor soups and meats.

The tree is a larval host for the Palamedes swallowtail butterfly, and several species of birds eat the fruit. A close relative is *P. americana* of Central America, the avocado.

This species is very similar to the southern species Red Bay *Persea borbonia*, which is much less hairy, especially on the twigs, and is native north only to central North Carolina. ❖



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**Photo:** Swamp Bay (*Persea palustris*) taken by Phillip Merritt  
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