Myrica californica, better known as Pacific wax myrtle or bayberry, is a plain, rather unadorned appearing shrub, growing almost overlooked up and down the west coast. As unnoticed as it may seem, this evergreen shrub has many applications in our landscapes.
It makes a wonderful hedgerow plant, and when content, grows as tall as as small tree, reaching anywhere up to thirty feet tall and around.
Pruning and shaping is amenable to the myrtle, in fact, if it gets old and overgrown, it's fine to cut it down to the ground so it can resprout.
The myrtle’s leaves are long, narrow and dark green. Its blooms don’t hold much interest...the male flowers, called catkins, bloom between the leaves, whereas the female catkins flowers are nearer the tips. These become small, waxy purplish berries, supposedly eaten by birds. I have a male plant and the blooms are quite inconspicuous. The wax myrtle is in the (Myricaceae) as our spicy-leaved bay trees (Umbellularia californica); the leaves have a fragrance but not as potent as the bay’s.
Specific siting for growing a myrtle inland is important, as the myrtle is a coastal plant, ideally suited to a moist situation. My myrtle resides in the afternoon shade of a huge incense cedar, although it receives lots of morning sun. It thrives all winter on the rains, but if I forget to deep water it approximately once a month during the hot summer, it lets me know; a branch suddenly turns brown and dies. It can't be neglected.
Keator & Middlebrook in their "Designing California Native Gardens" show a photo of myrtle planted as a screen or a dense hedge. It can also be kept pruned as a single specimen tree. However, prudent pruning will keep the entire shrub fuller. Myrtle would also be a great background for flowering shrubs or larger perennials behind a pond.
By Judy Brinkerhoff