

Beach Plums

The beach plum (*Prunus maritima*) is a hardy native shrub that grows wild along the Atlantic coast from Maine to Virginia, but it will grow in almost any soil near or far from the coast. Beach plums have prolific, cream-colored spring blossoms that attract a host of pollinators, and the fruit is prized for jams and jellies. Elizabeth Post Mirel's book, *Plum Crazy*, which you might find on a gardening grandma's bookshelf or at your local library, provides recipes for everything from hors d'oeuvres to after-dinner drinks. To find even more, search the Internet for "beach plum recipes."

Four distinct cultivars of beach plums commonly available at nurseries—Resigno, Eastham, Hancock, and Squibnocket—have been selected for larger and better-flavored fruit. Many nurseries also offer the straight species, which may be cross-breeds of multiple cultivars. Beach plums have both male and female flower parts on the same plant, but they will not self-pollinate. To get fruit you need to plant at least two genetically different plants and avoid plants started from cuttings of the same parent. Even better, find a source for seed-grown plants or grow your own from seed.

To grow beach plums from seed, store clean dry pits at room temperature. Two to five months before planting, immerse them in water, discard any that float, and store the rest in damp peat moss in a jar in the refrigerator, a process called cold, moist stratification.

After five months of storage beginning November 15, many of the seeds will begin to sprout. Plant them in flats or directly in the garden, protecting them from rodents by covering them with fine wire mesh until the plants are established. To protect from rabbits or other herbivores, surround each young plant with a cylinder of half-inch wire mesh. Move them to their permanent location in fall or early the following spring.

You can also start new plants from existing ones by layering or by taking cuttings. For layering, bend a low-growing, flexible stem to the ground and cover it with soil, leaving 6 to 12 inches of stem above the ground. Bend the tip into a vertical position and stake the stem in place. In two years the stem will have grown its own root system, and the new plant can be separated from its parent.

To start plants from cuttings, cut three- to four-inch tips from young growth at the end of June or in early July, treat them with a root-inducing product such as Rootone™, and plant them in a potting medium out of direct sunlight. Cover pots with a clear plastic bag to retain moisture, opening it occasionally for air circulation. Check them in about six weeks. If well rooted, move them to their permanent location or pot them up. Remember, however, that plants started from layering or cuttings from a single plant will be genetically identical and will need a plant from another source nearby to set fruit.



Beach plums will begin to produce fruit in their second or third year, but it takes about six years to get a substantial crop. You can decrease this time by purchasing sizable plants. If you buy two nursery plants and then add plants from seeds, layering, or cuttings, it will also minimize poor pollination resulting from sequential rather than simultaneous blooming. This problem can occur with genetically dissimilar plants, especially when spring warms gradually. A cool spring followed by quick warming guarantees simultaneous blooms.

Beach plums have few pests. Aphids may attack tender new growth, but ladybugs and their larvae usually solve the problem as natural predators. Gypsy moth and winter moth caterpillars can defoliate beach plums in years when populations of these pests are high, but you can avoid serious

Cultivation NOTES BY RICHARD GRAEFE

infestations by planting your beach plums far from large trees. If you do observe damage, pick off gypsy moth caterpillars by hand, use a vigorous spray of water to remove them, or use the bacterial pesticide BT (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), which is toxic only to caterpillars. Winter moth caterpillars are harder to control because they roll up in new leaves. To control them without further damaging the foliage, gently squeeze each rolled-up leaf to crush the caterpillar inside.

Other pests include yellowjackets, which will burrow into ripe fruit and plum curculio, a native fruit weevil; brown rot fungi can damage blossoms as well as fruit. However, in over 40 years of growing beach plums, I've had only minor damage from these pests.

Generally, beach plums are ready to pick in late August or early September. Raking up and disposing of fallen fruit is the best control for most pests. Songbirds show little interest in beach plums; however, I am told that wild turkeys relish the fruit.

You can store beach plums in your freezer without processing. Then on a blustery winter day, pull out your beach plums and recipes, and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

References:

Clark, Roberta; Ulva, Richard; and Simser, David. *The Beach Plum: A History and Grower's Guide*, Cape Cod Cooperative Extension, Barnstable, MA (Undated).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prunus_maritima

Mirel, Elizabeth Post. *Plum Crazy: A Book about Beach Plums*, Clarkson N. Potter Publishers, New York, 1973.

Thanks also to Russ Cohen, "Naturalist and Wild Food Enthusiast," for his review and suggestions for this article.



Beach Plum Jelly

2 quarts
beach plums
6 cups sugar
 $\frac{1}{8}$ bottle
(or one
package)
commercial
pectin

Crush the plums in a large cooking pot. Add $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups water, cover and simmer one half hour. Pour into dampened cheesecloth or a jelly bag to strain juice over a large bowl. Do not squeeze the bag. Let the bag drain until it stops dripping.

Combine $3\frac{1}{2}$ cups of the juice with sugar and heat to full boil. Add pectin, boil one minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat. Skim off foam, pour into sterilized jelly jars. Follow manufacturer's directions for sealing dome-lidded jars. Makes about 7 eight-ounce jars.