

Psychotria nervosa

Family: Rubiaceae



Upright shrub growing in a mix moist forest



A cultivated shrub under an oak mid-September

**Common name: Wild coffee;
shiny-leaved wild coffee**

Synonyms (discarded names): *Psychotria undata*

Origin: Florida; Southern Mexico; Bahamas; Caribbean; Central America; Northern South America

U.S.D.A. Zone: 9-12 (20°F Minimum)

Growth Rate: Fast

Plant Type: Shrub

Leaf Persistence: Evergreen

Flowering Months: Spring and summer

Light Requirements: Low; medium; high

Salt Tolerance: Moderate

Drought Tolerance: Low to moderate; often found wilting in late spring.

Soil Requirements: Wide

Nutritional Requirements: Low

Major Potential Pests: Scales; sooty mold

Typical Dimensions: 6 -7 feet tall with an equivalent width

Propagation: Seeds or cuttings

Human hazards: None

Uses: Florida-friendly landscape; understory; border; foundation; mass planting; informal hedge; rain garden; specimen; butterfly and wildlife attractant

Natural Geographic Distribution

Wild coffee is found in the higher areas of swamps and in hydric and mesic hammocks and areas that are seasonally wet and dry. It is also found in limestone (highly alkaline) soils. It grows as far north as northeast Florida (Duval County) in cold protected areas. It is widely distributed in south and central Florida.

Growth Habit

Wild coffee is an upright, multi-stemmed, ever-green shrub. Under natural shaded conditions it is likely to be a lanky plant, taller than it is wide. In cultivation, it often appears as a bushy, wide spreading shrub with many more branches than its uncultivated counterpart. In full sun, it is a rounded shrub.



Wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*) growing with velvetleaf wild coffee (*Psychotria sulzneri*) in a moist naturally shaded location

Morphology

The leaves are opposite, simple, with entire but undulating margins when emerging and persistent on the stem. The shape of the blade elliptical to obovate and is from 3 to 6 inches long with a pointed apex. The upper surface is dark green and shiny with conspicuous and deeply impressed veins that gives it a quilted appearance. Because of the textured leaf, wild coffee is sometimes referred to as “the plant resembling a gardenia”. The gardenia and wild coffee do belong to the same family, *Rubiaceae*. The plant blooms intermittently in spring and summer. The flowers are small, tubular, white, and borne in umbels 2 to 3 inches wide. Wild coffee is so named not because it is a coffee substitute but because the fruits resemble those of the common coffee shrub; the fruit is an oval drupe that matures red, to scarlet to maroon. This makes it highly ornamental when contrasted with the green leaves. The drupes measure on average 5/16 inches in diameter and contains 2 seeds (pyrenes). It is eaten by a variety of birds including the Florida state bird the northern mockingbird, blue jays, cardinals, and catbirds through Summer and Fall. Since the shrub is attractive to wildlife, the seeds, once deposited, sow themselves nearby and produce seedlings. The plant is not invasive.

Leaf Development



7 September



15 September with undulating margins



23 September



7 October



Wild coffee leaves



Flowers in early April



Drupes on shrub

Early September



Drupes

Early September

Planting and Maintenance Guidelines

The increasing desire to use native plants makes wild coffee one of the most widely used plants in Florida landscaping due to its tolerance of shade and sun. It grows as a dense multi-stemmed shrub when given adequate space, light and moisture. When grown in full sun, it becomes a more compact plant when compared to its shaded counterpart. However, the plants usually fairs best in heavy to moderate shade; the north side of the house is ideal. In full sun, leaves occasionally show some yellowing indicating that high light is not the preferred condition for optimum growth.

Wild coffee is suitable for narrow side yards, under windows or where rain water washes off roofs and downspouts. Young seedlings transplant well. Plants from 3 gallon pots take 6 to 10 weeks to establish adequate roots so that they can survive on rain water only. Place wild coffee 4 feet from the sidewalk or foundation where when fully grown, it needs little or no pruning. When left unpruned, it usually maintains itself as a 5 to 6 feet high shrub with an equal width. An occasional plant can grow up to 10 feet tall. When used as a hedge, space plants 3 to 4 feet apart on center.

Large shrub-size specimens can be moved by pruning away about one-third of the foliage and keeping as much of the root system intact as possible. This is best done at the start of the rainy season.

The plant's ability to withstand drought is a mixed record. A non-irrigated plant is most likely to wilt in the dry season, March to June. Paradoxically, a plant exposed to full sun may remain turgid while a shaded plant may become limp from lack of water. Sometimes the entire plant or a portion of the plant may wilt. The plants are revived by irrigation or rainfall.



Shrub in full sun

Late April



Shrub in full bloom

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Early August



An informal hedge under oak

Early September



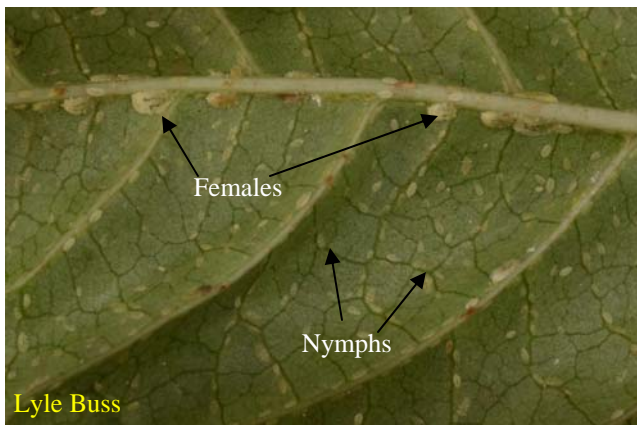
Wilted leaves in June



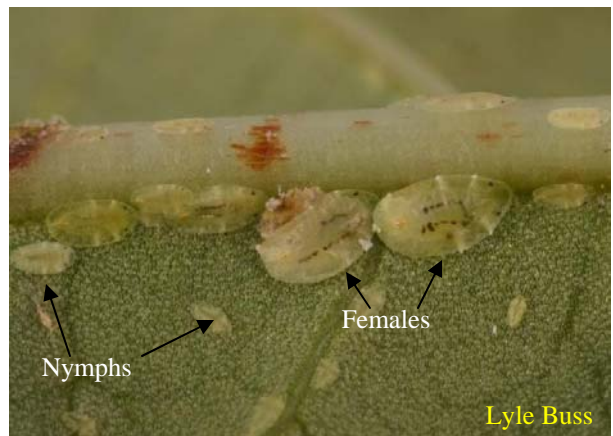
One-half of this plant is wilted in mid-June due to lack of rainfall

Pests

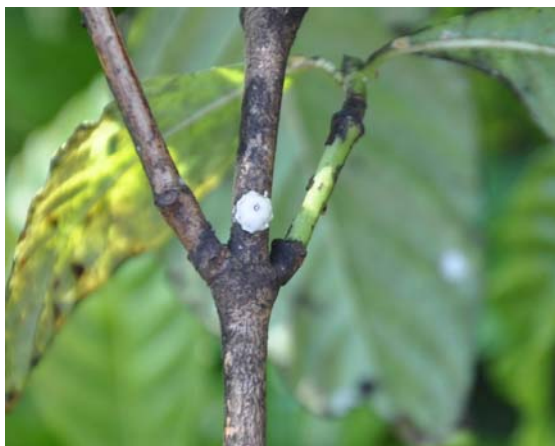
Several types of soft scales occur on wild coffee, including green scale (*Coccus viridis*), green shield scale (*Pulvinaria psidii*), hemispherical scale (*Saissetia oleae*), **croton scale** (*Phalacrocooccus howertoni*), and wax scales (*Ceroplastes* spp.). Soft scales produce a copious amount of honeydew that is food for sooty mold, a black fungus. Severe infestation of the green scale can cause stem dieback and the eventual death of the plant. The croton scale can also have heavy infestations on wild coffee.



Female and nymphs of green scales on the underside of wild coffee leaf



Close-up of green scales on wild coffee leaf



An unidentified wax scale species



Deposit of sooty mold caused by sucking insects such as soft scales

References

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Useful Links

[South Florida Native Plant Fact Sheets](#)

[Coontie Fact Sheet](#)

[Gaillardia YouTube](#)

[Air Potato YouTube](#)

[Palmetto Weevil YouTube](#)

All pictures were taken by Stephen Brown except where indicated.

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