

Kalmia latifolia (Mountain Laurel)

Botanical Bytes
By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 5'-15'
Foliage Width: 5'-15'
Flower Height: 5'-15'
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: White
USDA Hardiness: 4-9
Moisture: Average - moist
Light: Part Shade



Kalmia latifolia is a backbone of the mountain landscape. Its long, contorted, arching stems reaching for the light filtering through the trees add a unique architectural touch to enjoy if time is taken to see the trees, not just the collective forest. Mountain Laurel is generally found in the mountains north to Maine, west to Kentucky and Tennessee, and south to Mississippi and Florida.

The Native American Indian Cherokee, Cree, and Mahuna tribes used Kalmia for a select few medicinal purposes. It was used externally for pain related to scratches and as a deodorant. Most of the parts of the plant are toxic, so ingesting it in any manner would have been ill advised at best. The fine-grained stems and burls were used by settlers to make tobacco pipes, utensils, and tools. When processed correctly, the foliage could also be used to create a yellow dye.

There is evidence of Mountain Laurel being cultivated for landscape use as far back as 1740. Kalmia was named after Swedish botanist Peter Kalm, who explored eastern North America from 1747-1751. In 1933 Mountain Laurel was designated as the state flower of Pennsylvania.

Mountain Laurel has acquired a handful of alternate common names over its long stay in the lives of gardeners. Calico Bush, Spoonwood, American Laurel, and Ivy Bush are a few of the more common. Spoonwood seems like a fairly obvious choice, considering that the stems were used to make culinary utensils.

Kalmia in the garden is generally a well-behaved compact evergreen shrub when placed in a partial shade setting. Heavy clay soils and poorly drained sites should be avoided because it does not like wet feet.

The Laurel Sphinx Moth uses Kalmia as a larval food source. Kalmia also can be susceptible to leaf spots and blights. Bores, Scale, Whiteflies, and Lace Bugs will unfortunately attack the plant and cause superficial damage or even death in severe instances if left untreated. Deer and rabbits will generally leave it alone, which is a positive.

The flowers are awesome on a number of levels. The flower buds are uniquely geometrically shaped and well worth the time to investigate up close. Once the flowers open, they are a pure white with small red dots to add contrast.

Kalmia latifolia is a good backbone to a well-drained shade garden. Its evergreen foliage paired with its cool flowers makes it an easy choice. New cultivars have also improved compactness and the color range to now include pinks and reds.