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FAIRCHILD TROPICAL GARDEN COLUMN

Redberry stopper is a trouble-free native for small spaces

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Compact tree: A redberry stopper in Plot 46 of Fairchild Garden. Ken Stezer/Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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BY KENNETH SETZER

FAIRCHILD BOTANIC TROPICAL GARDEN

If you are even slightly interested in native plants, you have heard of (and smelled) white stopper. It gives off a wonderfully musky scent, slightly reminiscent of skunk, but not offensive.

There are quite a few types of shrubs and small trees commonly called stoppers, and it can get a little confusing. There's the fairly well-known white stopper (*Eugenia axillaris*). Then there's Spanish stopper (*E. foetida*), Simpson's stopper (*Myrcianthes fragrans*—one of the most common in cultivation) and red stopper (*Eugenia rhombea*). If you compare the botanical names, you'll note Simpson's stopper is not even in the same genus as the other stoppers, though if you go up one level to family, they are all members of the myrtle family (*Myrtaceae*).

Rare among the stoppers is the intriguing redberry stopper (*Eugenia confusa*), not to be confused with red stopper. Now the scientific nomenclature shines in its clarity; you'd never confuse *confusa* with *rhombea*.

Redberry stopper is surprisingly uncommon in cultivation. It is a small evergreen tree that grows to a compact 20 feet or so. Or it can be pruned and kept to shrub proportions. It flowers most heavily in spring and summer, producing clusters of small white or cream-colored flowers with yellow stamens. It's distinguished a bit from the other stoppers by its extremely graceful and arching leaf drip tips, and its beige bark, much rougher than the gray bark of Simpson's or Spanish stopper.

New leaves emerge reddish, turning green as they mature. True to its name, it produces small round berries, green at first, ripening to red. They naturally attract birds. If you prune the lower branches and encourage the redberry to grow as a tree, it takes up an amazingly small amount of space as its vertical growth is almost columnar. It would also make a perfect screening plant, border shrub or divider for privacy between yards if maintained as a shrub. Its slow-growing nature means you could even grow it in a large pot.

Its adaptability to different light conditions makes this stopper versatile for any yard. While it will grow denser in South Florida's sunlight, it does perfectly well in shade. In fact, one gorgeous specimen at Fairchild is growing in fairly deep shade, surrounded and shaded by larger trees. Its leaves may grow larger in shady conditions, but it isn't leggy or struggling for sun. My yard is full of shaded areas with limited horizontal space—redberry stopper is a perfect candidate for such difficult areas.

This native and endangered plant lives naturally in coastal hammocks of South Florida and the West Indies, where it is sometimes called ironwood. But what's in a name, and why "stopper"?

The usual tale is that the fruit was eaten by Native Americans and early settlers (who also used its dense wood for implements) to "stop" intestinal distress, but I haven't seen research to support this. One source gave the etymology of its use as a physical barrier, and therefore a "stopper." We may never know.

Once established, drought-resistant redberry will do well in a variety of well-drained soil types, especially our alkaline soil. Redberry will be available at Fairchild's Ramble, Nov. 8-10. See it for yourself in the garden in Plot 46, right outside the visitors' center.

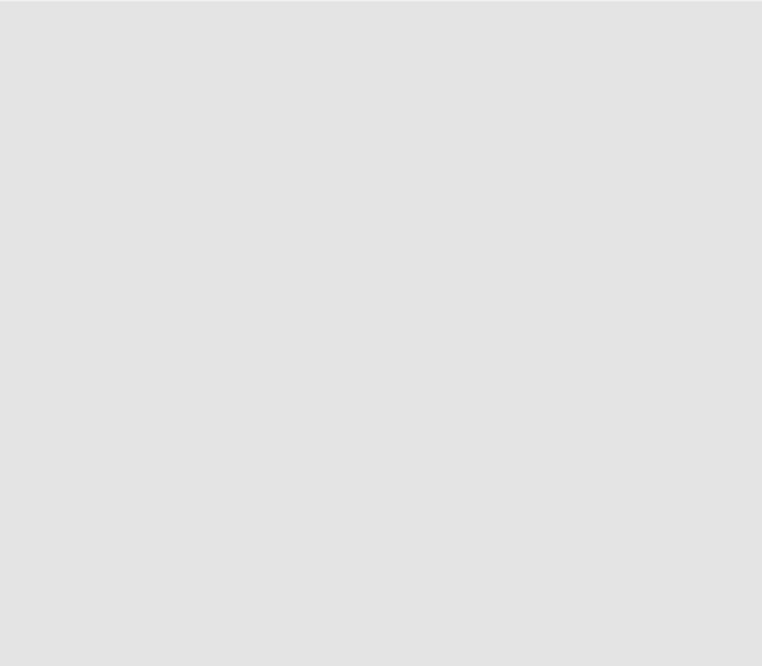
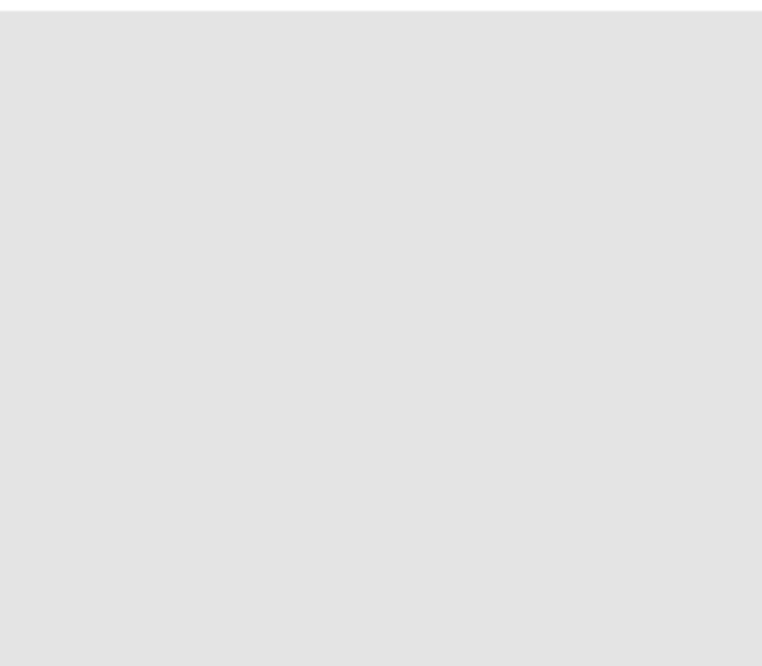
Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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