

The Little Laurels

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Never mind that the native mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) has been described as our most beautiful evergreen shrub, there are still people around who keep trying to change and “improve” it! Over 100 years ago someone found an unusual small-leaved variant. It is so uncommon that it has been observed in the wild less than six times. These semidwarf or myrtle-leaved laurels are usually referred to as miniature mountain laurels and, at least when found in the wild, belong to the botanical form *myrtifolia* of *Kalmia latifolia*.

The few plants found and propagated from the wild have flowers that are light pink in bud and open near white, much like flowers of the species. Hilliers in England was one of the few nurseries to offer these plants in the 1960s. The first plants I received (1963) came from nurseryman Hay Reid of Osterville, Massachusetts, and were just seedlings grown from seed of a *K. latifolia* f. *myrtifolia* plant and looked like our native mountain laurel. However, I made crosses between these seedlings and one fourth of the offspring were small-leaved semidwarfs, that is the form *myrtifolia*. That was the first evidence that this unique plant form was under the control of a single recessive gene — one of those Mendelian traits that segregates independently — or put another way, there were no intermediate types or blending of the normal and *myrtifolia* types.

By crossing the *myrtifolia* seedlings among themselves I obtained 100% *myrtifolia* types, but if one was crossed with red-budded, rich pink, or banded laurel the offspring had the typical foliage and growth habit of regular mountain laurel. In 1976, I placed several of the *myrtifolia* seedlings in a screened cage before the flowers opened. When the flowers began to open a bumble bee was introduced into the cage to cross-pollinate the flowers. I harvested a lot of seed and almost 100% of the seedlings grown have been *K. latifolia* f. *myrtifolia* types. I selected one of the seedlings and named it ‘Elf’ and that was the first *myrtifolia* selection to be named. I have kept that seed from 1976 in an envelope in a refrigerator and grow a few seedlings from it almost every year. The seed was still viable after 20 years and in that time the original ‘Elf’ plant was 3-1/2 ft × 3-1/2 ft.

With appropriate crosses and by going through two or more generations it has been possible to combine several of the striking flower color selections of normal growing laurel into plants of the *myrtifolia* form.

Two cultivars that have flowers rich pink in bud and medium pink open are ‘Tiddlywinks’ and ‘Tinkerbell’. ‘Tiddlywinks’ is a bit tighter and slower growing. The flowers of the more vigorous ‘Tinkerbell’ have more substance and appear to last longer. After 20 years the original ‘Tiddlywinks’ was 32 inches high and 42 inches across, whereas ‘Tinkerbell’ was 4 ft high and 5 ft across.

‘Minuet’ has dark, glossy pointed leaves and the open flowers are rich cinnamon maroon trimmed in white. A 10-year-old plant in a landscape planting would be about 30 inches × 30 inches. The original plant after 20 years was only 40 inches × 40 inches.

‘Little Linda’ is the fifth miniature I have named. It is characterized by red flower buds that open nearly white and then turn pink — a typical sequence for many of

the larger-leaved, red-budded laurels. Foliage of 'Little Linda' is glossy and the leaves relatively broad. The original plant was 3 1/2 ft × 3 1/2 ft in 15 years.

One nice attribute of all the *K. latifolia* f. *myrtifolia* selections is that they are vigorous when young and grow almost as fast as the large-leaf selections. It is not until they begin to flower or get into the landscape that they become slow growing. Their special merit as garden plants is that their mature height is roughly half that of normal mountain laurel, 4 to 5 ft versus 8 to 10 ft in 20 to 25 years, and thus they fit better in some of today's smaller gardens and landscapes. Like other laurel and many rhododendrons, pruning at a young age is usually necessary to get a dense, multibranched plant. Best branching occurs if plants are pruned when dormant. They appear to be less shade tolerant than the larger-leaf selections.

These small leaved cultivars need to be vegetatively propagated; they do not come true to type from seed. Like most mountain laurel, cuttings are difficult to root so that tissue culture (micropropagated) plants are the preferred starting point for most nurseries. A few nurseries have in-house labs but most growers purchase their plants from independent labs (For a list of labs and more info on all aspects of propagating and growing *Kalmia*, see the book by the author). The culture of these small-leaved laurels is the same as that for other laurels. In containers that means a well drained, well aerated mix. Many successful growers use aged pine bark as a major component of the media.

If you haven't grown *Kalmia* before, beware it is not an easy crop. At least not nearly as easy to grow as Mother Nature would lead you to believe. She has millions of acres of plants growing beautifully on apparently terrible sites from soggy swamps to rocky outcrops. But, as Dick Bir has pointed out, if you put them in a rich garden loam they don't have the grace to die quickly; they just linger on looking ever worse — if it was easy there would be no challenge. *Kalmia* can and is being grown successfully in nurseries. Yet the consumer demand for mountain laurel is not being met, especially in the Northeastern U.S. Plants of any kind over 24 inches are in very short supply. Anyone growing quality plants is able to sell them at a reasonable price. We need more growers of both the small-leaved and regular mountain laurels. There are approximately 80 cultivars now and more will be named. Likely candidates include miniatures with red budded/banded flowers or with near-petaled flowers.

[Note: the author requests a breeders fee of 15 cents for each plant propagated and sold of the four small leaved cultivars most recently named: 'Little Linda', 'Minuet', 'Tiddlywinks', and 'Tinkerbell'. These fees have helped support additional breeding and selection of *Kalmia*.]

LITERATURE CITED

Jaynes, R.A. 1997. *Kalmia*, mountain laurel and related species. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon.