

# Nature Notes

...from Sharon

The Seagrape is an evergreen native to South Florida and ranges from a low-branching shrub to a sprawling tree. It is found near the coastal hammocks and dunes throughout the Preserve. Away from the dune areas, it can get over 30 feet tall. This tree is also native to coastal regions of the tropical Americas and West Indies. It is in the Buckwheat family. The Seagrape is one of the first plants to colonize sand dunes and is a great soil stabilizer. It is a very drought-resistant and salt-tolerant plant. It thrives in well-drained, sandy soils in full sun, often forming dense thickets on sand dunes. The thickets serve as wind buffers during storms. There are male and female trees. This plant is often used in home and commercial landscapes as shrubs or specimen trees throughout South Florida.

**Seagrape** (*Coccoloba uvifera*)



The Seagrape has large leathery, alternate leaves that can be up to 10 inches in diameter. They are roundish (a little longer than wide), with a colorful primary vein that is red extending from the base.



New leaves are very shiny and a bronzy-green. The entire leaf turns red when it ages then drops off the tree. This happens throughout the year—not just in the fall. The Seagrape begins to flower and fruit when it is between 6 and 8 years old. During the spring, very small greenish-white flowers appear in clusters on stems up to 6 inches long. There are male and female flowers—each flowering on respective trees. Bees and butterflies love to help pollinate these fragrant flowers.

In late summer, the female trees bear velvety, green fruit in long, grape-like clusters that ripen to a luscious purplish toward the end of summer. The fruit ripens individually and not as a cluster. In fact, you may see these ripening throughout the Preserve now. If you have a keen nose, you will smell the sweet, ripe grapes. As they get very ripe and drop off, you will start to smell something more like a strong wine when approaching an area with a lot of droppings. The grapes are about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch round and have a single seed inside. The grapes are attractive to raccoons, birds, and gopher tortoises throughout the Preserve. Although fruit is produced only on female trees, a male tree must be present for pollination to produce fruit.



When ripe, the edible grapes are sweet to eat raw and can make good jelly—said to taste like apples. They have also been used to make wine. Leaves were once used as paper and as plates. Native Americans and early settlers used the trees as “message” boards—scratching messages on leaves for others that came along the trail. A message remains on the leaf until the leaf falls off the tree—up to a year later. Leaves, roots, and bark were each used to make a tea to treat asthma and hoarseness in traditional medicine in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the Caribbean. It is said eating a few ripe Seagrapes may ease an upset stomach. Currently, it is being studied as a treatment for diabetes and cancer.