

Leatherleaf Mahonia

There once was a tall, tough, but quite attractive shrub named Mahonia which was not often planted because of the leafy prickliness. Leatherleaf Mahonia (*Mahonia bealei*) is a shade-loving evergreen shrub, well adapted to North Texas. It has leaflets with dagger-like prickles at the ends that closely resemble those of a holly. Why choose such



a prickly shrub for your landscape? In late winter and very early spring, Leatherleaf Mahonia puts on clusters of small chartreuse-yellow flowers that are followed by bunches of blue berries. This shrub is a dramatic one with distinctive dark green to almost blue-green, leathery leaves provide textural significance planted in a group as a backdrop of softer plants. Additionally, birds like to use it for cover from predators while snacking on the blue berries.



As we become more cognizant of the limitations of natural resources, especially water, in Texas and as many gardeners shy away from using high levels of pesticides and fertilizers, many turn to Earth-Kind® plants. These plants, including Leatherleaf Mahonia, gain distinction from having been tested over multiple years at lower-than-normal levels of water, fertilizer, pesticides, and chemical disease preventatives needed to allow the plant to thrive. Leatherleaf Mahonia has a rating of 7 on the Earth-Kind 1-10 scale. This means it is a relatively good “resource efficient” plant – generally heat and drought tolerant, with only

moderate water and fertilizer needs, in addition to not having much in the way of pest or disease issues.

Leatherleaf Mahonias can be propagated by seed or by taking cuttings from a plant. They can be planted at any time of year in North Texas. Wrap some burlap or plastic around the plant to protect your hands and arms while planting or take care how you grab hold of this Mahonia. Prepare the planting hole and have everything ready ahead of time, so you can carefully plop it into place with a minimum of handling. It is deer and rabbit resistant – we may call them “dumb” animals, but they know what to nibble – and what to stay away from!

Leatherleaf Mahonia may be a challenge to get planted, but once it's in the ground, it is easy to care for. It only needs supplemental water once a week, twice weekly in our driest times, grows well in soil amended with good quality compost and good drainage, and requires fertilizer only two or three times during a growing season. It prefers a shady spot in the landscape and will tolerate even moderately dense shade. If planted in too much sun, the plant will scorch yellow.

No pests or diseases typically cause any trouble for Leatherleaf Mahonias. It grows from three feet up to eight feet, depending on how much water it gets. Several could be planted as a screen or a small grouping would make a nice focal point behind lighter colored plants such as hardy ferns or colorful perennials. These spiky babes have an upright growth structure and are reluctant to branch. This means each stalk grows individually and the plant enlarges outward by adding multiple suckers from the base (similarly to a nandina). Occasionally, an odd stalk will grow out of scale with the rest of the bush. When you prune Leatherleaf Mahonias to control these odd shoots or the basal suckers, make the cut flush with another stem or as close to the ground as possible – take out the entire stalk. Certainly, do not trim with hedge clippers into a ball, square, or other unnatural shapes.

If grassfires are something you must be concerned about, or if your neighborhood consists of zero-lot lines with houses very close together, Leatherleaf Mahonia might be an excellent choice for your shady landscape. With proper care, these are generally considered a good firewise landscape plant with moderate resistance to heat-generated flames. If you're a numbers person, this translates to a 7 on a 1-10 scale, with 10 being the most fire-resistant plants.

Consider bringing Leatherleaf Mahonia to the shady dance in your landscape if you are still struggling with that mid-level. She's prickly and a little stand-offish, but SO worth the careful handling. She will reward you with texture, unusual color, and pleasant bird friends dining on her berries in winter. You won't be sorry! Happy Gardening!

Sources:

<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/plant-selector/>

<http://ekps.tamu.edu/firewiseindexexplanation>

<http://www.txsmartscape.com/plant-search/plant-details.php?id=457>

<https://easttexasgardening.tamu.edu/2014/05/06/leatherleaf-mahonia/>

<https://neilsperry.com/2010/04/from-the-sperry-garden-april-2010/>

Resources:

Texas A&M AgriLife, Aggie Horticulture - "Earth-Kind Landscaping"

<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/plant-selector/>

"Firewise Index Explanation", <http://ekps.tamu.edu/firewiseindexexplanation>

Texas SmartScape, "Leatherleaf Mahonia Details"

<http://www.txsmartscape.com/plant-search/plant-details.php?id=457>

Neil Sperry's Gardens, "From the Sperry Garden - April, 2010"

<https://neilsperry.com/2010/04/from-the-sperry-garden-april-2010/>