

INVASIVE PLANT SPECIES OF VIRGINIA

SPECIES COMMON NAME:

Leatherleaf Mahonia

SCIENTIFIC NAME:

Mahonia bealei

Threat

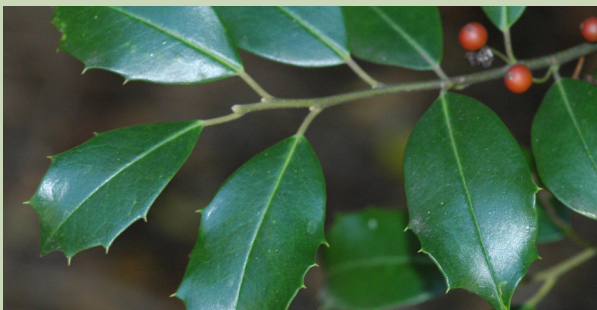
Leatherleaf mahonia (*Mahonia bealei*) is an emerging invasive shrub in Virginia with a significant potential for spread. While it prefers disturbed areas and forests, it is adaptable and can successfully invade a variety of habitats. The shrub is currently under-documented in the state, but has already established itself in Virginia's coastal plain, piedmont, and mountain regions.

Leatherleaf mahonia is commonly planted as an ornamental, where it produces large fruits that are eaten by birds and other wildlife and consequently spread into natural areas. This form of spread is its primary mode of invasion. The plant can also spread vegetatively through root suckers.

NATIVE ALTERNATIVES

Many native shrubs can make excellent alternatives for leatherleaf mahonia. For the same spiny leaved holly-like look, consider **American holly** (*Ilex opaca*). It has great visual appeal from the evergreen leaves and bright red berries, and significant benefits for native wildlife. While American holly trees can get quite large over time, they can be pruned to maintain a smaller shape. There are also cultivars available that will remain smaller in size. Many other native options are also available. For an evergreen option, consider **wax myrtle** (*Morella cerifera*). Deciduous options include **winterberry** (*Ilex verticillata*) and various **viburnums** (*Viburnum* spp.).

American holly



Report Sightings

If you believe you have found a wild occurrence of leatherleaf mahonia, you can assist in conservation efforts by reporting your findings. Collect complete location information including coordinates if possible. Take clear photos of the plant from a distance and up close. Detailed images of leaves, flowers, fruit, and bark are particularly helpful. Reports can be emailed directly to invasive.species@dcr.virginia.gov or reported online through the Early Detection and Distribution Mapping System (EDDMapS). Reports can also be made on a smartphone using the free EDDMapS or iNaturalist apps.

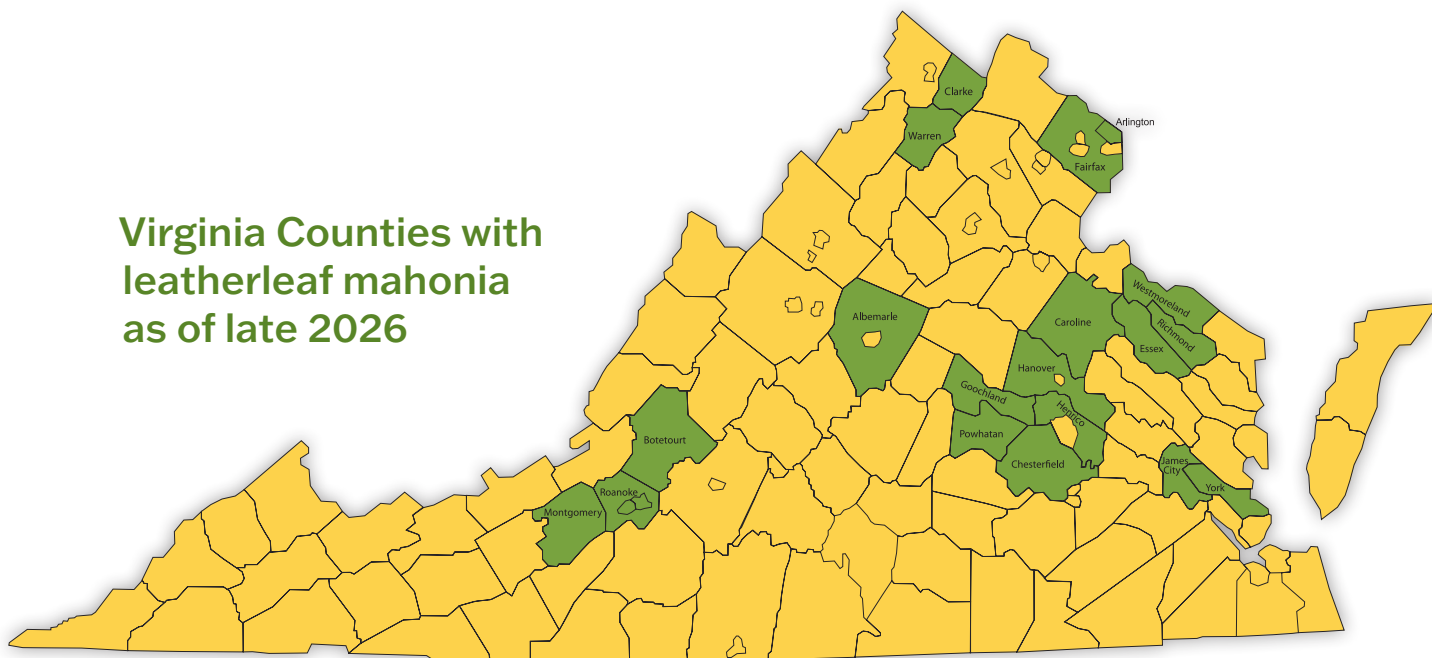
Description

Leatherleaf mahonia is a medium sized, multi-stemmed woody shrub with an alternate branching pattern. Leaves are pinnately compound, meaning that there are many leaflets that branch off a central stalk, with one terminal leaflet at the end. Leaves are waxy, evergreen and holly-like with sharp, stiff spines. The tops of leaves are a dark glossy green, while the undersides are lighter with a whitish coating. In late winter, bright yellow flowers appear at the top of the plant. These mature to a dark blue or purple fruit with a white, waxy coating resembling grapes. The bark is light brown and, when cut, the inner tissues are a bright yellow.



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Virginia Counties with leatherleaf mahonia as of late 2026



Distribution

Leatherleaf mahonia is widespread throughout much of the southeastern United States. As of late 2026, confirmed reports existed for 19 counties in all regions of Virginia. It has been most frequently documented in the coastal plain, but escapes are likely under-documented throughout most of the state. Leatherleaf mahonia prefers mesic forests, but can tolerate a wide range of soils and light levels and can be found invading various habitat types.

Control

Manual removal of leatherleaf mahonia can be difficult due to the spiny leaflets. If attempting to remove by hand, use gloves. Plants should be removed when the ground is soft to ensure successful removal of all roots. Small plants can be pulled by hand; larger plants can be removed with weed wrench devices.

Herbicides will often be required in order to achieve mortality. Larger invasions will likely require herbicide. For more information on chemical control, contact your local cooperative extension agent or area forester.

Where leatherleaf mahonia is planted as an ornamental and cannot be removed, removing and responsibly disposing of the grapelike fruit can help prevent spread. Fruit should never be composted; instead, double bag and dispose of it as trash.

Photo credits:

Karan A. Rawlins, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org
Mahonia bealei, James Weaver, inaturalist.org
Nancy Loewenstein, Auburn University, Bugwood.org

TO REPORT A SIGHTING:

DCR Invasive Species Team
invasive.species@dcr.virginia.gov

Online mapping and reporting tool:
<http://eddmaps.org>

Smartphone apps: **iNaturalist**, **EDDMapS**

SOURCES

EDDMapS. 2025. Early Detection & Distribution Mapping System. The University of Georgia - Center for Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health. Available online at <http://www.eddmaps.org/>; Accessed August 4, 2025.

Berberis bealei (Leatherleaf Mahonia). (n.d.). In *North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox*. <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/berberis-bealei/>; Accessed September 10, 2025.

Miller, J. H., Chambliss, E. B., & Loewenstein, N. J. (2015). *A field guide for the identification of invasive plants in southern forests* (General Technical Report SRS-119). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station.

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