

LIGNUM-VITAE

Guaiacum sanctum L.

Synonyms: *Guajacum sanctum* L.; *Guaiacum parvifolium* Nuttall

Family: Zygophyllaceae (caltrop)

FNAI Ranks: G2G3/S1

Legal Status: US-none FL-Endangered

Wetland Status: US-none+ FL-UPL



Field Description: Short, gnarled **tree** with white bark, growing to as much as 20 feet tall, but usually from 8 to 12 feet; **twigs** gray, with enlarged nodes. **Leaves** opposite, 3.5 inches long, evergreen, pinnately compound, with 3 - 4 pairs of leaflets, each to about 1 inch long and tipped with a small, short tooth; leaf pairs sometimes folding up during the heat of the day. **Flowers** 1 inch across, with five twisted, spoon-shaped, blue petals. **Fruits** orange, 4 - 5 lobed, opening to expose red seeds that ripen to black.

Similar Species: The non-native species of lignum vitae (*Guaiacum officinale*) has escaped from yards into some hammocks in Dade County; it has 4 - 6 leaflets per leaf, hairy petals, and a 2-winged fruit.

Related Rare Species: Both species of lignum vitae are globally rare due to

deforestation and to commercial exploitation of the hard, decay-resistant wood for medicine and wood products.

Habitat: Rockland hammocks.

Best Survey Season: Flowers March - July, but leaves are distinctive all year.

Range-wide Distribution: South Florida, West Indies, Mexico, Central America, and northern South America.

Conservation Status: Lignum vitae is rare throughout its range due to habitat loss and commercial harvesting. It occurs in about 10 parks and preserves in FL. It is placed in CITES Category II (may become extinct unless trade is subject to strict regulation) because of harvesting for its wood.

Protection and Management: Protect tropical hammocks from clearing and development. Eradicate exotic pest plants. Prevent harvesting of this species for its wood. Enforce plant protection laws and prosecute plant poachers.

References: Coile 2000, CITES 2000, IRC 1999, Nelson 1994, Tomlinson 1980, Ward 1979, WCMC 1998, Wunderlin 1998, Wunderlin and Hansen 2000a.