

Arbutus menziesii

[Synonyms : *Arbutus procera*]

MADRONA is an evergreen tree. Native to western North America it has tiny white flowers with a honey-like fragrance.

It is also known as Arbuti tree, Arbutus, California strawberry tree, Coast madrone, Laurel, Laurelwood, Madrona, *Madroña* (Spanish), Madrona burr, Madrone, Madrone laurel, Madrone tree, Madrono, *Madroño* (Spanish), Manzanita, Pacific madrone, *Sisnu* (Arabic), and Strawberry-tree.

Menziesii commemorates the name of a Scottish naval surgeon, botanist and plant collector, Archibald Menzies (1754-1842). After serving as an assistant surgeon in Wales, he joined the Royal Navy. For his first posting he was based for four years as an assistant surgeon on the Halifax Station (Nova Scotia) which enable him to study the local flora particularly. This period led to his introduction in 1786 to Sir Joseph Banks (who was President of the Royal Society and Director of Kew Gardens). His next appointment (as surgeon) on HMS *Prince of Wales* took him on a 3 year world voyage to the North Pacific during which he sent plants home and after which he was congratulated upon the health of the ship's crew. Both aspects appear to have been relevant in the British Government's decision to appoint him in 1790 as naturalist on HMS *Discovery* when she made her five year circumnavigation of the world under the captaincy of the English navigator Captain George Vancouver (1757-1798). During this voyage Vancouver carried out survey work in Australia and New Zealand and then went on to charting some of the western North American coastline as well – but one wonders whether Menzies' brief from the Government was not the more arduous one particularly as too he replaced the appointed surgeon who had to return home after falling ill. He was required to study the natural history (flora and fauna) of the countries visited, collect dried specimens and seeds, grow any significant plants in a special glass frame supplied on board ship that could not be propagated from seed, assess the viability of European plants in those countries, collect mineral samples, and keep notes on the activities of natives, their customs, clothing, artefacts, language – all with a view to the possibility of sending settlers out from England in the future. At the end of the voyage he was again congratulated on the health of the crew. On his return to England he was posted to the Caribbean and when he retired from the Service he set up a practice in London as a doctor and surgeon. Apart from many plants being named after him, Menzies name was also given to Menzies Bay and Menzies Point on Canada's western coast and, in passing, Vancouver itself and Vancouver Island were named after George Vancouver.

The orange-red berries provided food for a few North American Indian tribes. The Costanoan, Wailaki, Karok and Pomo tribes all ate the berries fresh, but records show that the Yurok Indians preferred them roasted. Three tribes, the Karok, some of the Pomo and the Miwok (who also made the fruit into a beverage) seem to have dried the berries for storage as Winter food.

In the past the hard wood has provided a source of charcoal. Several North American Indian tribes used the strong heavy wood in different ways. Records show that for the Karok it was carving material, some of the Salish tribe fashioned cooking spoons from it, and the

Mendocino Indian tribe used it generally for making tools and tool handles and specifically for stirrups and lodge poles. Some of the Pomo Indians used the wood as fuel.

The bark has been used for tanning. Certainly the Cowichan and Saanich Indians used it for this, whereas Tolowa, Yurok and Karok children recognised it as winter sledge material. Women in the Tolowa tribe made the light reddish-brown inner bark up into everyday dresses.

For some of the Pomo tribe the flowers offered a love charm.

Both the Hoh and Quileute Indians smoked the leaves as tobacco, and the leaves also played a role in some of the Karok ceremonial ritual.

As veterinary medicine madrona was valued by the Yuki Indians for treating their horses.

Madrona also provided a source of medicine for some Indian tribes. The Skokomish, some of the Pomo and the Salish used it for treating sore throats, and the former, as well as the Saanich, favoured it as a remedy for colds. Some stomach disorders could be eased with it according to the Skokomish, Yuki and Miwok tribes, and the Yuki and Concow Indians employed madrona when they needed to cause vomiting. Various the Cowichan, Yuki and Pomo tribes all used the tree for treating burns, sores, cuts and wounds. The Cahuilla tribe employed it for some stomach disorders, and the Cowichan prescribed it for diabetics.

Although not especially popular with man, the flowers are eaten by doves, turkeys and wild pigeons, the leaves are eaten by cattle when grass is scarce, and the berries are especially attractive for birds and deer.

The bark has been used commercially for tanning.

Apart from high quality furniture, the light brown wood has also been used for turning and for making mathematical instruments and tool handles. It has also been made into charcoal for gunpowder. The burls or knots in the wood have been sought out for decorative veneers and used to make pipes.

Archibald Menzies identified madrona in the late 18th Century but it was the Scottish botanist, David Douglas (1798-1834) who introduced specimens of the tree to Britain.