

Arbutus unedo

STRAWBERRY-TREE is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to southern Europe (particularly Portugal) eastern France and south-western Ireland it has tiny creamy-white or pinkish flowers.

It is also known as *Aardbeiboom* (Dutch), *Aardbeienboom* (Dutch), *Arbouse* (French), *Arbousier* (French), *Arbousier commun* (French), *Arbutus*, *Bagg* (Arabic, Saudi Arabian), *Borrachín* (Spanish), *Caine apple*, *Caithne* (Irish Gaelic), *Cane apples*, *Common arbutus*, *Cuince* (Irish Gaelic), *Dogwood*, *Erdbeerbaum* (German), *Ervedeiro* (Portuguese), *Fraisier en arbre* (French), *Irish strawberry tree*, *Killarney strawberry tree*, *Koca yemiş* (Turkish), *Koumariá* (Greek), *Lännenmansikkapuu* (Finnish), *Lily of the valley tree*, *Madroño* (Spanish), *Mayflower*, *Medronheiro* (Portuguese), *Mefusbren* (Welsh), *Outlubb* (Arabic, Saudi Arabian), *Planika velkoplodá* (Czech), *Smultronträd* (Swedish), *Strawberry madrone*, *Ticisnou* (Arabic, Saudi Arabian), and *Westlicher Erdbeerbaum* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘esteem and love’, and ‘I love only you’.

The flowers are pollinated by bees. The fruit can take 13-14 months to ripen. This means that ripe fruit are hanging on the tree (some in mid-Autumn and the main crop in late Autumn to early Winter) when the flowers for the following year’s crop are blooming.

Warning – the fruit (or wine made from them) can be poisonous in large quantities and can cause headache and indigestion. The flowers if consumed can cause slight sweating.

Unedo, according to Pliny (23-79) the Roman natural historian, is derived from Latin *edo* (to eat) meaning ‘to eat one only’. It is the Latin name for the strawberry tree and its fruit.

The tree was known both to Dioscorides, the noted 1st Century, Greek physician and to the Arabian physicians of that time, but it is not thought to have been used extensively in a medicinal capacity by any of them. (Today some authorities have noted that the fruit of the strawberry-tree, or a very closely related species, are sometimes sold in cinemas in country districts in Greece as ice-cream would be in parts of western Europe.)

The Spanish city of Madrid was originally surrounded by forests that gave shelter to the strawberry-tree, and the shrub together with a bear forms part of the City’s coat of arms. It was also adopted as the emblem for Massachusetts in the United States as it is said to be the first blossom seen by the Pilgrim Fathers, following the severe North American Winter in 1620 that greeted them after they landed.

The seedy (in some people’s view insipid-tasting) strawberry-like (*Potentilla*), scarlet fruit are used in preserves. While in some Mediterranean countries (particularly Italy and Corsica) it forms the basis of a liqueur known as *crème d’arbouse* and is an ingredient in other alcoholic drinks.

In Ireland where most botanists appear to subscribe to the view that the strawberry-tree is native, there is a conflicting undercurrent from a seeming minority of professionals who suggest that it is actually an introduced plant as some of its old sites there also happen to be near monasteries or hermits’ cells. (It is known to have been cultivated for the fruit by some monasteries in western Europe. These were not only eaten raw but also provided an ingredient for liqueurs. Additionally there is a legend about a monk, Bresal, who taught Irish choral music for several months in a Spanish monastery. On his return to Ireland he

so pined for many of the plants he saw while teaching in his Spanish religious house that the strawberry tree sprang up in Irish soil to give him solace.) A further explanation for the strawberry tree's existence in Ireland depends upon a theory that it spread north from Brittany when the climate was warmer there in the early post-glacial period. Whatever the plant's Irish history proof is available of its existence in Ireland over 400 years ago and it is believed that it was introduced to England in 1586 from Killarney (where it can still be found to this day). [However the strawberry tree's foothold in Ireland is said to be under threat nowadays from the inroads made by rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*).]

It is also interesting to note that although the Romans introduced many plants from the Mediterranean area to the British Isles during their occupation (which lasted until the 5th Century) these did not include the strawberry tree. It is only believed to have reached England from Ireland. By the 18th Century however English landscape gardeners were choosing it for hedging.

In some parts of the Mediterranean the leaves, fruit and bark have been used for tanning. In Greece the wood (which is suitable for turning and is said to produce a good charcoal) is fashioned into flutes.

Medicinally, it is possible that it could be of use in the treatment of arteriosclerosis, and it was used once by European herbalists for treating diarrhoea and kidney and liver complaints.