

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi

[Synonyms : *Arbutus uva-ursi*, *Arctostaphylos adenotricha*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* var. *adenotricha*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* var. *coactilis*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* var. *leobreweri*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* subsp. *longipilosa*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* var. *marinensis*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* subsp. *monoensis*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* var. *pacifica*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* var. *stipitata*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* var. *suborbiculata*, *Arctostaphylos officinalis*, *Uva-ursi procumbens*, *Uva-ursi uva-ursi*]

BEARBERRY is a trailing or creeping evergreen shrub. Native to cool regions in Europe (including Britain) and to northern North America, it has strongly-scented, tiny waxy, pink-tinged, white flowers.

It is also known as *Bärentraube* (German), Barren bilberry, Barren myrtle, Bearberry, Beargrape, Bear's berry weed, Bear's grape, Bear's-grape bilberry, Bear's weed, Bear's whortleberry, Bilberry, *Blanchnog* (Irish Gaelic), Box-leaved wintergreen, Bralins, Brawlins, Burren myrtle, *Busseralle* (French), *Busserole officinal* (French), Common bearberry, Cranberry, Craneberry wire, Creashak, Creshak, Crowberry, Dandies, Devil's tobacco, Dogberry, Dug berry, Foxberry, Fox plum, *Gayuba* (Spanish), Gnashicks, Ground holly, Hardberries, *Hhrozník* (Czech), Hogberry, Hog-cranberry, *Immergrüne Bärentraube* (German), Indian-wort, Kinnikinnick, *Kostrounek* (Czech), Manzanita, Mealberry, Mealplum, Mealyberry, *Medvedica lekárska* (Slovak), *Medvědice léčivá* (Czech), *Medvědice lékařská* (Czech), *Mjölön* (Swedish), *Moanagus* (Irish Gaelic), Mountain box, Mountain cranberry, Nashag, *Raisin d'ours* (French), Rapper, Rapper dandy, Red bearberry, Rockberry, Sagackhomi, Sandberry, *Sianpuola* (Finnish), *Tolokněnka* (Czech), *Toloknianka* (Russian), Universe vine, Upland cranberry, *Uva de oso* (Spanish), *Uva-ursi*, *Uva ursina* (Italian), Uversy, Vancouver jade, and Wild cranberry.

Warning – the plant is poisonous. Prolonged or excessive use can cause constipation, vomiting and nausea. If the leaves are consumed urine can turn olive-green or brown.

The plant can be subject to preservation orders in some countries. Trade demands made upon it in Europe are such that it has been the subject of over harvesting and at the end of the 1990s its future survival was considered to be threatened.

Bearberry leaves have been confused with those of the cowberry (but leaves of *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* have glandular brown dots beneath and fine teeth) and of the box (although leaves of *Buxus sempervirens* have a notch cut at the tip).

Uva-ursi is derived from Latin *uva* (bunch of grapes) and *ursus* (bear) components meaning 'bear's grape'.

The small fruit are eaten locally and, in some parts of Russia especially, the leaves are used to make a drink variously known as Kutai or Caucasian tea.

Birds and animals particularly grouse enjoy the glossy red berries – and in North America bear, deer, chipmunks and raccoons as well – but cattle avoid it.

In Sweden and Russia the leaves are used for tanning, the latter commercially, witness 'Russian leather' which may be familiar to some readers. In North America, Indian tribes cured pelts with them. The leaves have also been used to obtain a grey or black dye not least by the Great Basin Indian North American tribe.

The Quileute, Navajo and Blackfoot Indians used the leaves during ceremonial rituals, and the Blackfoot tribe also used the dried fruit to make rattles and necklaces. In more pragmatic vein the Thompson Indians rubbed mashed berries into the inside of cedar root baskets as a waterproofing medium.

Bearberry did not escape superstitious associations as the Thompson Indians placed the leaves in their moccasins for protection after the death of a partner, and some of the Navajo tribe added the dried leaves to tobacco mixtures as a good luck charm. Records indicate that the Chippewa believed that smoking the roots would lure game like a charm, and the Cheyenne are said to have been convinced that burning the leaves would repel or expel evil spirits from people.

For the Blackfoot tribe the shrub also provided a weather forecast. It was contended that if a heavy fruit crop emerged the following Winter would be harsh.

Many North American Indian tribes including the Okanagan-Colville, Nootka, Paiute, Carrier, Blackfoot, Heiltsuk, Makah, Shuswap, Pawnee, Thompson, Cheyenne, Klallam, Cree, Keresan, Hoh, Salish, Montana Indian, Great Basin Indian, Skagit, Jemez, Chippewa, Nitinaht, Hesquiat, Potawatomi and Quileute Indians and the Alaskan and Arctic Inuits, smoked crushed dried leaves with or without other ingredients.

The fruit keep well and these were stored for Winter food by the Koyukon, Blackfoot and Tanana tribes, as well as the Alaskan Inuits, and they were made into what is understood to have been a refreshing drink by the Thompson and Blackfoot Indians. For the Okanagan-Colville Indians the fruit were a staple food, while the Montana Indian tribe stored them as emergency rations, and the Bella Coola and Hanaksiala Indians both elevated the fruit to a distinctive status as they made special dishes with them that were eaten at ceremonial feasts. The Flathead tribe used the berries to make a meat sauce, and the Coeur d'Alene, Thompson, Okanagan-Colville, Chippewa, Sanpoil, Montana Indian and Carrier tribes all used the fruit to flavour soup. Quite a few tribes such as the Skokomish, Tolowa, Koyukon, Blackfoot, Chinook, Klimesquit, Cree, Carrier, Thompson, Coeur d'Alene and Montana Indian mixed the berries with various meat fats or fish dishes, and several of them also dried the fruit. Apart from those already mentioned records indicate that the fruit were eaten as well by the Yurok, Kwakiutl, Oweekeno, Makah, Cherokee, Spokane, Nitinaht, Squaxin, Salish and Nuxalk and the Arctic Inuits.

The North American Menominee Indian tribe used the dried leaves as a flavouring in what might otherwise have been unpalatable medicines prepared for treating female disorders. Records also show that bearberry provided medicine for the Kwakiutl, Chippewa, Hoh and Quileute tribes. The Flathead Indians used it to treat ear problems and burns, and the Carrier and Sanpoil tribes applied it to sores. Bearberry was employed by the Okanagan-Colville, Thompson and Cherokee Indians for various kidney disorders, and the Chippewa and Okanagan-Colville are believed to have used it for some blood problems. The Cheyenne appear to have turned to it for pain relief and to ease coughs and colds, while the Blackfoot, Thompson and Crow Indians all made an infusion of the plant or leaves for a mouthwash. Tanana Indians are said to have eaten the berries as a laxative, and some of the Cree tribe employed the shrub for treating diarrhoea in children, and for period problems and other female disorders. It was a source of a remedy for headaches and rheumatism for the Chippewa Indians, and the Okanagan-Colville turned to it for some eye problems.

From the wide use of bearberry apparent among the North American Indian community it is hardly surprising to note that their value as a cash crop is recorded for some of the tribes. The Makah Indians dried the leaves for barter, and the Oweekeno and Nuxalk tribes harvested the fruit similarly.

The leaves offer a commercial flavouring for pipe tobacco.

Medicinally, the plant was used by the Welsh physicians in Myddvai in the 13th Century and it was given medical recognition by German doctors working in Berlin in 1763. Since the 18th Century it has declined in popularity although it had been used to treat bronchitis, diarrhoea and incontinence. Today the leaves can be used in the treatment of kidney ailments, and recent research now suggests that it has effective antiseptic properties.