

Gaultheria procumbens

[Synonyms : *Gaultheria humilis*, *Gaultheria repens*, *Gautiera repens*]

WINTERGREEN is a creeping evergreen shrub. Native to north-eastern North America it has tiny, often pink-tinged, white flowers.

It is also known as *Amerikanisches Wintergrün* (German), Aromatic wintergreen, *Aspérule odorante* (French), Berried tea, Boxberry, Canada tea, Canterberry, Checkerberry, Chequer berry, Chickaberry, Chickberry, Chicken berry, Chidkerberry, Chinks, Clink, Creeping partridge berry, Creeping wintergreen, Deerberry, Dewberry, Drunkards, Eastern teaberry, Eyeberry, Fox berry, *Gaulthérie* (French), Ginger berry, Gingerleaf, Ginger plum, Greenberry, Ground berry, Ground holly, Ground ivy, Ground tea, Grouse berry, Hillberry, Ivory, Ivory leaves, Ivory plum, Ivry leaves, Ivy, Ivyberry, Jersey tea, Jinks, Kinnikinnik, *Lamosalali* (Finnish), *Libavka poléhavá* (Czech), Little johnnies, Maidenhair, Mountain berry, Mountaineer tea, Mountain tea, One-berry, Partridge berry, Partridge plant, Pigeonberry, Pine ivy, Pippins, Pollom, Procalm, Red berry tea, Red pollom, Roxberry, Shallon, Spiceberry, Spicy wintergreen, Spring wintergreen, Squawberry, Squaw plum, Squaw vine, *Stellina odorosa* (Italian), Teaberry, Tea leaves, *Thé des bois* (French-Canadian), *Thé du Canada* (French), Three-leaved wintergreen, Trailing gaultheria, *Waldmeister* (German), Wax cluster, Winterberry, *Wintergrün* (German), Young chinks, Young-come-ups, Young ivories, Young plantlets, and Youngsters.

The leaves are gathered in Summer and distilled to give an essence.

Warning – advice from a qualified practitioner is essential before internal consumption. The pure oil which is absorbed by the skin can cause external irritation and if taken internally can also lead to vomiting, nausea, pneumonia, respiratory problems, ringing in the ears, convulsions and death.

Wintergreen can be confused with the poisonous mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*).

Procumbens means ‘prostrate or low-growing’.

Some of the North American Indian tribes such as the Cherokee, some of the Algonkin, the Chippewa and Abnaki Indians made a tea from the leaves. Both the Cherokee tribe and some of the Chippewa Indians used the berries for food. Some of the Algonkin snacked on them and the Iroquois Indians made them into dried cakes which they stored for future use or took with them when they were out hunting. The Chippewa also used the leaves as a flavouring in food.

Several North American Indian tribes also added the leaves to tobacco smoking mixtures and the Cherokee used the dried leaves as an alternative to chewing tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*).

For some of the Algonkin Indians a plant infusion was a remedy for headaches. The Iroquois, Potawatomi, Delaware, some of the Chippewa and the Menominee tribes all used it to treat rheumatism, and for the Potawatomi it was also able to reduce the discomfort of fever. Many of the North American tribes chewed the leaves while running, trekking or carrying heavy loads in order to aid breathing, and the Cherokee, Iroquois, some of the Algonkin and the Chippewa all treated colds with it. Some of the Algonkin also used it as a remedy for influenza, and it was turned to in the treatment of various kidney problems

by the Mohican, Delaware, Iroquois and Shinnecock tribes. For the Iroquois it was also a remedy for some blood disorders, worms and venereal diseases. Some stomach problems were treated with it by parts of the Algonkin tribe, and the Cherokee also turned to it for treating dysentery, indigestion and sore gums. In addition it offered a tonic for Indians in the Delaware and Chippewa tribes.

The Indians introduced North American settlers to the plant in the 16th Century and Mother Marie de L'Incarnation (1599-1672) in particular was subsequently to describe it as a 'miracle herb'. Many of the settlers' children were required to chew the roots for six weeks in the Spring in order to reduce tooth decay.

Today locally the small scarlet berries are eaten raw and also cooked in fruit pies. The leaves are still popular for a tea known as *Mountain tea*; and the freshly harvested roots are an ingredient in a root beer made in the Spring and Autumn.

Wintergreen has an unusual property. It absorbs ultra-violet waves especially if combined with sugar. This can be illustrated easily as a sugared wintergreen sweet or lozenge chewed in the dark will emanate a bright, blue-green light.

This was the first species of this genus to be discovered and it was being cultivated in England by 1762.

The commercial oil of wintergreen was first obtained from this plant then from young birch trees (*Betula lenta*). The oil which was extracted from wintergreen's aromatic leaves contained a pain-killing ingredient that had the advantage of being easily absorbed by the skin. (It also came to be used by bookbinders under the name 'Iceland', to keep leather supple.)

'Wintergreen' is said to have been a popular handkerchief perfume for 19th Century North American ladies and it has also been used to scent soap. Today the preparation contains synthetically produced methyl salicylate.

The essence (known as 'Oil of wintergreen') can be used today on a commercial basis by the pharmaceutical industry, by the confectionery industry to flavour sweets and crystallized fruit, as well as chewing gum. It can also be used by the drinks industry as a flavouring for teas, by the toiletry industry in dental preparations and by the perfumery industry.

Medicinally, the oil (and occasionally an infusion of the leaves) has been used to treat asthma, rheumatism, lumbago, sciatica, skin disorders, sprains and neuralgia.