Kalmia latifolia

[Synonyms : *Cistus chamaerhodendros*, *Kalmia latifolia* var. *laevipes*, *Ledum floribus bullates*]

MOUNTAIN LAUREL is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to north-eastern North America it has deep pink buds opening to rose-tinged, white flowers that are purple marked inside.

It is also known as American briar, American laurel, *Amerikanischer Berglorbeer* (German), Big-leaved ivy, Broad-leafed laurel, Broad-leaved kalmia, Burl laurel, Calico bush, Calico flower, Calico tree, Clamoun, Common laurel, High laurel, Ivy, Ivy-bush, Ivy leaf laurel, Ivywood, Kalmia, Lambkill, Laurel, Laurelwood, Little laurel, Mountain ivy, Mountain kalmia, Pale laurel, Poison ivy, Poison-laurel, Red-stemmed ivy, Root laurel, Rose laurel, Sheepbane, Sheep laurel, Small laurel, Spoonhunt, Spoonwood, Wicky, Wocky, and Wood laurel; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ambition.

Warning – the whole plant contains a poisonous substance. It should only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. It can cause excessive salivation, watering eyes, gastroentiritis, vomiting, abdominal pain, slowed pulse, weakness, lowered blood pressure, impaired co-ordination and respiration, convulsions, paralysis, coma and death. Children have been poisoned from sucking the flowers, and adults from drinking tea made from the leaves. Honey can be poisoned if bees visit the plant. Humans can be poisoned by consuming birds eg. pheasants, pigeons, which have eaten the berries. Leaves, shoots and fruit are hazardous for livestock and some other animals (excluding deer) and can cause death.

The poisonous mountain laurel can be confused with wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*).

Latifolia is made up of Latin *lati-* (broad, wide) and *-folia* (leaved) components.

As witness to its possible longevity plants have been reported with over 100 tree rings.

The easily-worked wood from the roots has been made into tobacco pipes, spoons and trowels by some North American Indian tribes – and the Cherokee Indians used it for carving. The wood has been turned into tool handles, and has also been burnt as fuel – especially by the North American settlers.

Despite mountain laurel's poisonous nature it is much enjoyed by deer.

In North America in 1790 several deaths were reported from eating mountain laurel's wild honey. (Apparently bee keepers in the proximity of a large amount of the shrub have been known to try a little of the honey out on a dog before offering it for human consumption.)

Familiar to some of the North American Indian tribes as a source of medicine it has been noted that the Delaware however used it to commit suicide. Some of the Cree Indians took a leaf decoction as a remedy for diarrhoea, whereas both the Mahuna and Cherokee tribes used the plant externally – the former as a deodorant and the latter as a painkiller (the leaves were rubbed on scratches made on the skin over the site of the pain).

Although it can be seen growing in dense thickets along the highways of New England in the United States, it has actually been adopted as an emblem by other States namely Pennsylvania and Connecticut, the latter in 1907 and the former in 1933.

Branches are sometimes gathered today for Christmas decorations.

The wood has been used for making briar pipes and has been made into other small objects too, including tool handles. It has also been burnt locally as fuel.

Both seeds and plants of mountain laurel were introduced to England in 1726 by Mark Catesby (c.1679-1749), the English naturalist, after his return from his North American travels during which he had come across it. However this species seems to have begun to be established there only with the living specimens of mountain laurel obtained ten years later by Peter Collinson (1694-1768). Authorities note that it proved difficult to propagate and it was considered rare in its new home for some time. (Some authorities have mused over the possibility that Peter Kalm (1715-1779), after whom the genus was named, may well have seen mountain laurel first in Peter Collinson's garden during his six month stay in England on his outward journey to North America as he visited there on 10th June, 1748.)

Medicinally, the leaves have been used to treat diarrhoea, sore eyes, skin disorders and syphilis.