

Mitchella repens

SQUAWVINE is a mat-forming, evergreen subshrub. Native to eastern North America it has small fragrant, often pinkish-tinged, white flowers.

It is also known as Boxberry, Checkerberry, Chickenberry, Cowberry, Creeping box, Deerberry, Eyeberry, Foxberry, Heath-hen-plum, Hive vine, Jesuit berry, Mitchella vine, Mountain tea, One-berry, Partridgeberry, Partridge vine, Pheasant berry, Pigeon-berry, Pigeon plum, Pudding plum, Running-box, Snakeberry, Snakeplum, Squawberry, Squaw plum, Teaberry, Turkeyberry, Twin-berry, Two-eyed berry, Two-eyed checkerberry, Two-eyed plum, and Winter clover.

Repens means ‘creeping’.

The plant was a source of food for a few North American Indian tribes including the Cherokee. Records suggest a relative culinary versatility in the Iroquois tribe as they not only dried the mashed fruit in small cakes that could be stored for future use (including snacks for their hunters) but the women ate the berries raw, and they also used them to make a sauce. The Micmac tribe on the other hand made the fruit into a drink. The fruit were also taken as an aphrodisiac by Iroquois Indians.

The fruit are also eaten by wild birds which explains some of its common names.

Some of the Chippewa Indians included squawvine in ceremonial ritual when they smoked the leaves.

The shrub featured in Cherokee veterinary medicine as they gave it to pregnant cats and subsequently the kittens.

Beyond anything else however squawvine seems to have been most highly valued by many North American Indian tribes (including the Penobscot and Chippewa) as a source of medicine. Some of the North American Indian women, including those of the Cherokee tribe, used to take an infusion of squawvine leaves regularly in the last months of pregnancy to ease labour at childbirth. The berries themselves (or a preserve made from them) were also taken to treat fever particularly by the Montagnais tribe as well as the Iroquois Indians who believed it to be safe for both children and adults. The medicine men in the Menominee tribe made a tea of the leaves as a remedy for sleeplessness. In addition to the Cherokee Indians, the Menominee, some of the Delaware and also the Iroquois tribe used squawvine for treating various female disorders – and it was prescribed in the Delaware and Cherokee tribes particularly for some period problems. Seminole and Iroquois Indians turned to the plant for treating various kidney ailments, the Iroquois prescribed it for urinary disorders, and the Cherokee chose it to treat bowel complaints. It was a remedy for dysentery, fluid retention and piles among the Cherokee Indians, and it was used to treat vomiting, blood disorders, wind, venereal disease and convulsions in children in the Iroquois tribe. The Cherokee also used it to cause sweating, while the Iroquois Indians applied it to rashes on babies’ sensitive skins and bleeding cuts on adults – and the Delaware and Abnaki tribes used it to ease rheumatism.

Squawvine’s fused scarlet or white berries were depicted by the New England poet, Isaac Bassett Choate (1833-1917) when he wrote

Made glad with springtime fancies pearly white,
Two tender blossoms on a single stem

In their sweet coral fruitage close unite

As round bead cut from a garnet red.

Today as with raspberry leaves (*Rubus idaeus*), squawvine can still be used to ease childbirth.

Herbalists also recommended the plant for fluid retention, some period problems and diarrhoea for which it can still be recommended.