

*Potentilla vesca*

[Synonyms : *Fragaria americana*, *Fragaria chinensis*, *Fragaria concolor*, *Fragaria vesca*, *Fragaria vesca* subsp. *alba*]

**WILD STRAWBERRY** is an evergreen creeping perennial. Native to northern temperate areas in western Asia, Europe and North America, it has small yellow-centred, white flowers.

It is also known as *Ahomansikka* (Finnish), *Al farawlah* (Arabic), Alpine strawberry, American strawberry, *Bosaardbei* (Dutch), *Bosaardbeien* (Dutch), *Červené jahody* (Czech), *Çilek fidani* (Turkish), Common strawberry, Earth mulberry, *Erdei szamóca* (Hungarian), European strawberry, European wood strawberry, Field strawberry, *Fragola alpina* (Italian), *Fragola comune* (Italian), *Fragola di bosco* (Italian), *Fragola selvatica* (Italian), *Fraise des bois* (French), *Fraisier comestible* (French), *Fraisier commun* (French), *Fraisier des bois* (French), *Fraisier sauvage* (French), *Frâse* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Frâses sauvages* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Frawlah* (Arabic, Egyptian), *Fresa de los bosques* (Spanish), *Fresa silvestre* (Spanish), *Frutilla de los bosques* (Spanish), *Havejordbær* (Danish), Hedge strawberry, *Jahoda obyčejná* (Slovak), *Jahodník obecný* (Czech), Lady's berry-boors, *Månadssmultron* (Swedish), *Mansikka* (Finnish), *Markjordbær* (Norwegian), *Mefusen y Goedwig* (Welsh), *Metsmaasikas* (Estonian), *Moranga* (Portuguese), *Morango-silvestre* (Portuguese), *Morango silvestre europeu* (Portuguese), *Morangueiro-bravo* (Brazilian, Portuguese), Mountain strawberry, *Orman çileği* (Turkish), *Ou zhou cao mei* (Chinese), Perpetual strawberry, *Poziomka pospolita* (Polish), *Satrobøery* (Thai), *Sen lin cao mei* (Chinese), Sheep nose, *Skogssmultron* (Swedish), *Skovjordbær* (Danish), Small fruited strawberry, *Smultron* (Swedish), Sowberry, Sow-teat strawberry, Sow tit, Strawberry, *Tut farangy* (Persian), *Vild jordbær* (Danish), *Wairudo sutoroberii* (Japanese), *Walderbeere* (German), *Wald-Erdbeere* (German), Wild strawberry, Woodland strawberry, Wood strawberry, *Yabani çilek türü* (Turkish), and *Ye cao mei* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'be on the alert' (blossom), esteem (fruit), innocence (blossom), love (fruit), and perfection (fruit).

The small red berries (which are occasionally white with yellow pips) are considered to have more flavour than cultivated varieties.

Warning – the fruit can cause an allergic response.

*Vesca* is derived from Latin *vescor* (to eat, feed on) or *vescus* (consuming, thin, wasted) meaning 'edible, thin or feeble'.

Many believe today that the name Strawberry was originally 'strewberry' and that it emerged from the practice of placing straw under the growing cultivated strawberries. The English agricultural writer Thomas Tusser (c.1520-c.1580) wrote

If frost doe continue, take this for a lawe,  
The strawberries look to be covered with strawe.  
Laid ouerly trim upon crotchis and bows,  
And after uncovered as weather allows.

It is understood however that it could actually refer as well to the tangled runners covering the ground around the plant and would then be derived from an obsolete form of the past tense of the verb to strew, *straw*.

The fruit is often associated with elves and fairies and once denoted pagan love goddesses. In Nordic mythology Frigg, wife of Odin, smuggles dead children into heaven by hiding them among wild strawberry leaves. On the other hand in Rome the wild strawberry was associated with the goddess of love, Venus.

One relevant masterpiece is housed in the Prado in Madrid and painted by the Dutch artist, Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1460-1516), who was also known as Jerome van Aken. This particular painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* offers an interpretation of eroticism. It not only depicts scattered ripe strawberries but also portrays, among the naked figures, a girl being offered a wild strawberry the size of the head of the man tendering it.

For Christians the wild strawberry is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and to John the Baptist. The plant, shown bearing both flowers and fruit, symbolizes the ‘good fruits of the Holy Spirit’, while the leaf represents the Trinity. (This symbolism may well explain why the leaves and fruit can sometimes be found in church carvings.)

The wild strawberry features in English heraldry. A duke’s coronet bears eight strawberry leaves as a symbol of rank.

The fruit have also been incorporated in designs for materials. One particularly famous one is the ‘Strawberry thief’ pattern of the celebrated English poet, socialist and craftsman, William Morris (1834-1896). In this instance he is said to have been inspired by a patch of wild strawberries growing (even today apparently) in the courtyard of Kelmscott Manor in England.

References to the fruit in early English records seem to be relatively few and the general view among today’s food historians is that the strawberry was initially considered to be a medicine (perhaps due to its tiny size in the wild which made it laborious to pick). The first English record is said to appear in a 10<sup>th</sup> Century Saxon plant list, and the household roll of the Countess of Leicester in the latter part of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century is said to refer to the ‘straberie’. The wild strawberry was also the basis for one of the London street cries in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> Century (but these were not heard of in Paris for another hundred years). Slowly in western Europe the fruit came to acquire more lyrical qualities as 16<sup>th</sup> Century writings indicate. The English poet, Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) was to write in his *The Faerie Queene*

One day as they all three together went  
Into the wood to gather strawberries.

while his peer, William Browne (1591-1643) in *Britannia’s Pastorals* wrote

The wood nymphs oftentimes would busied be,  
And pluck for him the blushing strawberry,  
Making from them a bracelet on a bent,  
Which for a favour to this swain they sent.

At that time in Britain it was often the custom to transplant wild strawberries from wood to garden (in early Autumn or late Winter). Both the wild and cultivated strawberries are celebrated by many of the English literati. The bard of Stratford-upon-Avon, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentions them several times in his plays including the tragedy, *King Richard III* in which he refers to the Bishop of Ely’s Holborn garden.

My Lord of Ely, when I was last in Holborn,  
I saw good strawberries in your garden there;  
I do beseech you, send for some of them.

But perhaps one of the most delightful eulogies comes from the writer, Izaak Walton (1593-1683), whose most famous work is probably *The Compleat Angler*.

Indeed, my good scholar, we may say of angling as Dr. Boteler said of strawberries: 'Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did;' and so, if I might be judge, God never did make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling.

The fruit were also picked from the wild by poor children who then took them to market. Apparently the 17<sup>th</sup> Century English antiquarian and folklorist, John Aubrey (1626-1697), noted that around Bath in Somerset these enterprising children made wild strawberry boxes out of bark from neighbouring young ash trees and inadvertently killed new tree growth in the process.

Gathered from the woods for centuries all over Europe, some authorities believe it was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century that cultivation of other varieties began and led to the many now available. Other authorities claim that European countries, especially Britain, took little notice of the wild strawberry until the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. By then some of the early North American settlers had established themselves in New Hampshire and news of their introduction to a different species of the little fruit, by the North American Indians who had enjoyed them for centuries, filtered back to England. Yet another species of strawberry was being cultivated by South American Indian tribes in Chile long before Europeans landed on that Continent. In 1714 plants of both these species were brought to England and crossed, and the result was the commercial strawberry. But wild strawberries are still gathered today, particularly in France where they are used in fancy pastries. Laplanders make a traditional Christmas pudding by mixing the fruit with bilberries (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and reindeer milk.

The little fruit were familiar to many North American Indian tribes. Authorities have noted that they were eaten fresh by the Gosiute, Okanagan-Colville, Bella Coola, Oweekeno, some of the Dakota, the Nitinaht, Hesquiat, Thompson, Potawatomi, some of the Salish, the Klallam and the Kitasoo tribes. Records also indicate that of these at least the Potawatomi, Thompson, and Okanagan-Colville Indians all preserved the fruit by one method or another for Winter food. The Oweekeno made them into a jam, and some of the Salish Indians made a tea from the leaves.

The leaves and root were also a source of medicine for several North American tribes. The Potawatomi prescribed the root for some stomach upsets and the Thompson Indians used it for treating dysentery. The latter also took the root or leaves to ease diarrhoea, whereas the Thompson tribe used the leaves alone. For the Okanagan-Colville the leaves contained disinfectant qualities and were applied to skin sores – and like the Thompson Indians they believed they were safe for children.

Cosmetically the fruit can be used to whiten discoloured teeth and whiten skin, including light sunburn.

Not only are wild strawberries considered to have a flavour and scent that surpass cultivated varieties, but they also have a medicinal value lacked by today's cultivated relatives. In Roman times the wild strawberry was believed to have therapeutic qualities too and in the Middle Ages alchemists believed it to be a panacea.

Today the berries can be used by the food industry for making syrup and jam and by the cosmetics industry in skin-care preparations.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended the use of different parts of the plant for the treatment of oral and skin ulcers, dysentery, jaundice, diarrhoea, scurvy, some venereal diseases, gout, wounds and securing loose teeth.

It is the birthday flower for 13<sup>th</sup> May.