

*Prunus spinosa*

[Synonyms : *Prunus alleghaniensis*, *Prunus domestica* var. *spinosa*, *Prunus moldavica*, *Prunus spinosa* var. *typica*, *Prunus stepposa*]

**BLACKTHORN** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western Asia and to Europe it has small white flowers with many stamens.

It is also known as *Abrunheiro* (Portuguese), *Abrunheiro-bravo* (Portuguese), Allegheny plum, *Andrinillo* (Spanish), *Andrino* (Spanish), *Arán* (Spanish), *Arañón* (Spanish), *Arañero* (Spanish), *Asarero* (Spanish), *Atrigna* (Italian), *Berqouq el ouach* (Arabic), Blackhaw, *Briñón* (Spanish), *Bruñera* (Spanish), *Bruño* (Spanish), Bullens, Bullies, Bullison, *Ciruelo amargalejo* (Spanish), *Ciruelo endrino* (Spanish), *Ciruelo silvestre* (Spanish), *Draenen Ddu* (Welsh), Egg-peg bush, *Endrinera* (Spanish), *Endrino* (Spanish), *Endrino marañón* (Spanish), *Épine noire* (French), *Espino negro* (Spanish), Hedge-picks, Hedge-speaks, Heg-pegs, *Marañón* (Spanish), *Nère epène* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Néthe épingne* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Oratuomi* (Finnish), Pig-in-the-hedge, *Porumbar* (Rumanian), *Prugnolo* (Italian), *Prugno salvatico* (Italian), *Pruna salvagga* (Maltese), *Prunelle* (French), *Prunellier* (French), *Prunello* (Italian), *Prunier épineux* (French), *Pruno selvatico* (Italian), *Prunuso dorna* (Esperanto), *Schlehdorn* (German), *Schlehe* (German), *Schlehenpflaume* (German), *Schwarzdorn* (German), Scrogg, Slaathorn, *Slåen* (Danish), Slagen-bush, *Slän* (Swedish), *Slänbär* (Swedish), *Slänbuske* (Swedish), *Sleedoorn* (Danish, Dutch), *Slíva trnka* (Czech), *Slivka trnková* (Slovak), *Slivoň trnitá* (Czech), *Slivoň trnka* (Czech), Sloe, Sloe plum, Slon-tree, Snag bush, *Spina fiorita* (Italian), *Trní* (Czech), *Trnka* (Czech), *Trnka obecná* (Czech), *Trnka obyčajná* (Slovak), *Trnky* (Czech), Wild plum, Winter kecksies, Winter picks, and *Zwarte doorn* (Danish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of austerity, difficulty, and ill luck.

A dwarf variety often found on coastal shingle appears to bear a spectacular amount of fruit. The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – hard sharp thorns can penetrate a cow's hoof or the sole of a horse's foot.

*Spinosa* is Latin (thorn, spine) meaning 'spiny'.

Remains of the fruit were found by archaeologists in the sites of the Swiss Lake dwellers at Robenhausen in the European Alps that date back to about 8000 BC.

Blackthorn is the focus of many superstitions. As Christian legend has it that the blackthorn's branches were used to fashion the Crown of Thorns monks felt it was unlucky to take a spray of its blossom inside. Although this may not always be recalled today many people still believe blackthorn to be an omen of death. Branches were used in European fertility rituals in which they were baked in an oven, burnt out in the fields and afterwards the ashes were scattered over the earliest wheat (*Triticum*) sowings. A blackthorn (sloe) rod was believed to have been carried by witches for use in causing miscarriages. Thus when witches were burnt at the stake these branches were tossed on with them. And in contrast despite the dire omens surrounding the plant blackthorn was once used for English New Year decorations. Branches would be made into a wreath which was then scorched in the fire and dressed with mistletoe (*Viscum album*). To complicate things further however

some have believed it to be unlucky not only to bring blackthorn blossom indoors but also that ill fortune will come from wearing the blossom say as a buttonhole.

In Ireland the blackthorn (or the oak, *Quercus*) has provided the material for the traditional cudgel or shillelagh. Nowadays small versions of these are made from blackthorn as souvenirs for the Irish tourist trade. A blackthorn stick has also been the traditional badge of office for the mayor of Sandwich, an English town in Kent. Blackthorn wood is value for making strong walking sticks and handles for tools.

The dried leaves (known in Ireland as Irish tea) were once smoked as an alternative to tobacco. Although the raw small bloomy black berries will dry the mouth rapidly they make what many European cook's recognize as a desirable jelly – and can also be used to make jam. However many people today will be more familiar with their role as an ingredient in sloe gin for which pricked sloes (the blackthorn fruit) are steeped for some months in gin, vodka or white brandy. The fruit are also used today as a commercial ingredient by the drinks industry. It is interesting to learn that in Tunisia the raw berries, despite their drying qualities, are recognized there as a famine food.

Today the cosmetics industry uses the fruit pulp as an ingredient in face-masks.

The fruit was used in weather forecasting as many berries were believed to indicate an imminent harsh winter and this resulted in such English slogans as

many sloans, many groans

and

many sloes, many cold toes.

In actual fact there is some credibility in this as in some parts of Britain the flowering shrub can coincide with sharp cold winds and the inclement weather is often known as a 'blackthorn winter'. Although this period might be unsuitable for planting out any tender plants it has nevertheless fostered the saying

When the blackthorn blossom's white

Sow your barley day and night.

The fruit juice provides an indelible marking ink and has also been used to dye linen a reddish colour that after several washings becomes a permanent light blue..

It is an emblem of the Scottish MacQuarrie clan.

The bark was used to eke out tea when it was very expensive and dried blackthorn leaves were mixed with the tea-leaves. The fruit's juice was also added to port as a dilutant and in France if nowhere else the unripe fruit were sometimes passed off as olives (*Olea europaea*).

The bark was (and still is) used in tanning (it gave a reddish brown shade to leather). The wood which has fine dark markings is still used in marquetry today and in the past unusually-shaped walking sticks were fashioned out of the twisted main stem of the shrub.

In Europe the bark used to be taken medicinally. The English agricultural writer, Thomas Tusser (c.1520-c.1580) wrote

By thend of October go gather up sloes,

Have thou in readiness plentie of thoës,

And keepe them in bed-straw, or still on the bow,

To staie both the flix of thyselpe and thy cow.

In the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries German Acacia made from the boiled and reduced juice of the unripe fruit was taken as an intestinal tonic. The fruit as a syrup were once used to stem haemorrhages and oral bleeding (as well as whitening teeth) and lotions made from the leaves were believed to be able to ease sore throats.