

Rhamnus cathartica

[Synonyms : *Baccae spinae-cervinae*]

BUCKTHORN is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to northern Asia, north-western Europe and North Africa, it has tiny honey scented, greenish-yellow or whitish-green flowers and leaves that turn yellow or brown in Autumn.

It is also known as Carolina buckthorn, Common buckthorn, *Echter Kreuzdorn* (German), *Espino cerval* (Spanish), European buckthorn, European waythorn, *Gemeiner Kreuzdorn* (German), *Getapel* (Swedish), Hartsthorn, Highway thorn, *Kreuzdorn* (German), Laxative ram, *Nerprun* (French), *Noirprun* (French), *Purgier-Kreuzdorn* (German), Purging buckthorn, Rams thorn, *Řešetlák počistivý* (Czech), *Rhafnwydden* (Welsh), Rhineberry, Sanguinaria, Sap green, *Spino cervino* (Italian), *Vägtorn* (Swedish), and Waythorn; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of cares, exile, sin, trial and tribulation.

The plant is pollinated by various insects but it is understood to be particularly attractive to the brimstone butterfly (*Gonepteryx rhamni*).

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous (especially the fruit). It should not be taken internally during pregnancy. The fresh plant must not be used and the prepared plant must be taken with care internally. It can cause abdominal pain, diarrhoea, vomiting, gastrointestinal disorders, kidney damage, muscular convulsions, difficulty breathing and collapse. The plant is poisonous for some animals. (It is said that while cows reject the plant horses, sheep and goats will graze on it.)

Cathartica is derived from Greek *cathartico*- component meaning ‘purging or cleansing’.

The ancient Greeks used to chew pieces of buckthorn bark to repel ghosts and evil spirits.

For many Christians buckthorn was believed to have been wound into the Crown of Thorns – although others subscribed to the view that it was blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) not buckthorn that was used. Certainly buckthorn attracted a reputation for having powers that could give protection against evil. In the Middle Ages in England twigs were placed in doorways providing this protection for those inside, whether man or beast.

Buckthorn was introduced to North America by European colonists probably in the 16th Century. They transported it with them as an indispensable part of their medicinal remedies. The Cherokee Indian tribe absorbed it into their medicinal repertoire and they not only used it as a purgative but also applied it in a wash to sore eyes and also for some skin problems.

The unripe berries yield a yellowish-green dye that was once employed for staining maps or paper (including playing cards) and was also used during the same period for tinting leather green (especially for gloves). Buckthorn has been the source of the water-colour artists’ pigment known as Sap green or Bladder green and in North America Chinese green.

The hard, heavy and durable, yellowish wood is used today for turning small objects.

Medicinally, buckthorn’s purgative qualities would be a drastic remedy. [Its potency is well illustrated by the claim that even bird’s flesh will have a potent laxative effect if the bird is consumed after it has been eating the berries.] 9th Century records show that despite this the Anglo-Saxons relied upon it as did the Welsh physicians of Myddvai 400 years

later. (The latter boiled its fruit with honey to make the potion more palatable.) By the end of the 16th Century the recommendation was that it be boiled with broth and the Syrup of Buckthorn of the mid-17th Century included aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*) and nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*) in the ingredients. The popularity of this drastic treatment would appear to be supported by the buckthorn seeds found in the drain of the reredorter (the privy which was sited behind the monks' dormitory) of the Benedictine Abbey at St. Alban's. Authorities have pointed out that buckthorn's use must have been considerable then for the seeds to have been found there in any quantity after several hundreds of years. It was not until the 19th Century that official opinion in Britain began to accept that this treatment could be more suitable for veterinary than for human medicine but in folk medicine its use persisted. Buckthorn has had a similar medicinal history in other parts of Europe and in North America. Today it is hardly ever used as a human remedy but a laxative preparation of syrup of buckthorn is used in veterinary medicine.