

Rhamnus frangula

[Synonyms : *Frangula alnus*, *Rhamnus sanguinea*]

ALDER BUCKTHORN is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to North Africa, central Asia and Europe (including Britain), it has tiny indistinct, greenish-white flowers and leaves that turn clear yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as Alder dogwood, *Amieiro-negro* (Portuguese), *Aropaatsama* (Finnish), *Arraclán* (Spanish), Arrow-wood, *Aune noire* (French), Berry-bearing alder, Black alder dogwood, Black alder tree, Black aller, Black dogwood, *Bourdaine* (French), *Brakved* (Swedish), *Brechwegdorn* (German), *Breuwydd* (Welsh), Buckthorn, *Chopera* (Spanish), Dogwood, European black alder, European buckthorn, *Faulbaum* (German), *Frangola* (Italian), Frangula bark, Glossy buckthorn, Persian berries, *Pulverholz* (German), *Sanguinho-da-água* (Portuguese), and Stinking Roger.

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous especially the bark, leaves and 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, strong purging, violent diarrhoea, cramps, vomiting, gastrointestinal disorders, kidney damage, muscular convulsions, difficulty breathing and collapse. The plant is poisonous for some animals.

Alder buckthorn is a protected plant in Northern Ireland under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

Frangula is an old name for this species.

A glancing similarity in appearance to the alder *Alnus glutinosa* (which likes to grow in damp sites too) and the fact that it has similar purgative qualities to those of buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) have led to its most familiar common name.

Alder buckthorn makes a very light inflammable charcoal that is ideal for gunpowder and has been considered by many to produce the best quality. As a result it acquired the name *Pulverholz* eg. powder-wood, in Germany and in Britain the name Black dogwood. The charcoal powder burnt unusually quickly and at one time alder buckthorn was specially cultivated in the South of England (particularly Sussex and Kent) for this purpose. However British supplies most recently (before the Second World War in the 20th Century) were imported from France and from what is now the Czech Republic although the feasibility of turning to the Cambridgeshire fens as an alder buckthorn source was eventually considered.

According to some authorities interest in alder buckthorn lay primarily in its dyeing qualities. Not only did dyers use it as a yellow woollen dye but with the addition of iron they also achieved a black colour as well. A sap-green colour can be obtained from leaves, unripe fruit and bark.

The wood is used today veneering as well as for making shoe lasts and wooden nails.

Like buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), alder buckthorn was once considered to be an essential ingredient in the medicine chest. Early European settlers in North America took it with them (probably in the 16th Century) to their new home not knowing that related species with similar qualities already existed in the new land.

Medicinally, it is possible that its value was not fully appreciated in Europe until the 14th Century after which German physicians progressively used it the most. Several European pharmacopias continue to recognize alder buckthorn as it can be gathered locally instead of importing the unrelated but probably better known cascara (*Rhamnus purshiana*) from North America. It was once used externally in folk medicine to help in healing wounds, and the bark (boiled in ale) was used as a remedy for jaundice. Today with caution it is primarily viewed as a cure for chronic constipation but may also be used to treat some gall bladder and stomach upsets – and a purgative fluid-extract is prepared commercially.