

Vaccinium myrtillus

[Synonyms : *Myrtillus nigra*, *Vaccinium frondosum*, *Vaccinium myrtillus* var. *oreophilum*, *Vaccinium oreophilum*]

BILBERRY is a deciduous shrub. Native to northern Asia, Canada, Europe (including Britain) and the northern United States, it has small white or greenish-pink flowers and leaves that turn red in Autumn.

It is also known as *Airelle* (French), Alpine bilberry, *Arándano* (Spanish), *Arando* (Portuguese), Arts, *Blåbär* (Swedish), Blackberry, Blackheart, Black-wort, Black whortleberry, Black whortles, Blaeberry, *Blaubeere* (German), *Blauwe bosbes* (Dutch), Blueberry, *Bollebar* (Danish), *Borůvčí* (Czech), *Borůvka černá* (Czech), *Bosbes* (Dutch), *Brimbelle* (French), *Brusnica čučoriedka obyčajná* (Slovak), *Brusnica čučoriedková* (Slovak), *Brusnice borůvka* (Czech), Brylocks, Burren myrtle, *Černé jahody* (Czech), Common blueberry, *Coraseena* (Irish Gaelic), Crowberry, Dyeberry, European bilberry, European blueberry, *Fraughan* (Irish Gaelic), *Fruogs* (Irish Gaelic), *Hafera* (Czech), Hartberry, Heathberry, *Heidelbeere* (German), Huckleberry, Hurtleberry, Hurts, *Llus* (Welsh), Low bilberry, Low blue huckleberry, *Mirtelo* (Esperanto), *Mirtillo* (Italian), Mossberry, *Mustikka* (Finnish), *Myrtille* (French), *Myrtille commune* (French), Myrtle blueberry, Myrtle whortleberry, *Myrtovka* (Czech), *Raisin des bois* (French), *Teint-vin* (French), Trackleberry, *Uva-do-monte* (Portuguese), Whimberry, Whinberry, Whortleberry, Whorts, Wimberry, and Wineberry; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of deceit, treachery, and treason.

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – the leaves used internally for a prolonged period can cause poisoning symptoms.

Bilberry berries have been confused with those of deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*).

Myrtillus is derived from Latin *myrteus* (of the myrtle) meaning ‘small myrtle’.

Past authorities have suggested that Bilberry is derived from a Danish word for ‘dark berry’ *bollebar*. This species is referred to in North America particularly as the Huckleberry.

Despite the uncertainty of historical records it is suspected that bilberries have provided food since pre-historic times.

In North America some of the Indian tribes added bilberries to stews. The small blue-black berries were a staple food for some of the Okanagan-Colville tribe and they formed a part of Inuit diet as well.

In the 19th Century in Britain restaurateurs and pastrycooks imported the fruit in quantity from Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia especially as an ingredient or flavouring for soups, preserves and pastries. The fruit have also been used as a red colouring for wine and have themselves been made into wine eg. *Heidelbeerwein*. Inhabitants of the Hebridean Islands are believed to have dried the leaves as an alternative for tea. Today the fruit are still prized in Germany and in Switzerland for culinary use. Apart from being eaten raw, they are also made into jams, preserves, pies, tarts and sauces. The dried berries also provide a flavouring on a commercial scale for liqueurs

Many European countries used the fruit juice for dyeing cloth (black or blue) not least among them, Germany, Ireland and Scotland. Some say that earlier the ancient Britons stained

their faces with the juice and that later the plant (with alum added) was the source of a blue dye that was used for linen, and paper.

Apparently in some parts of Ireland there is a saying

..... many a lad met his wife on Bilberry Sunday.

Apart from Lammass Day the last Sunday in July can be called Bilberry, Garland or Height Sunday when the bilberries should be ripe for picking. A long tradition in County Down well illustrates the saying as the fruit were picked in a special place and collected in rush baskets made on the spot – and the whole exercise leant itself to courting. (For some this tradition fell on the first Sunday in August and this came to be known as Garland or Fraughan Sunday.)

Medicinally, in more recent centuries it was used by European herbalists as a recognized medicinal remedy for lung diseases, vomiting and stomach upsets. It was also alleged that the fruit skin could aid night vision and this has been supported by subsequent scientific studies. Today interest is being shown in the fruit in Germany for the treatment of gout and rheumatism. In Russia the leaves and fruit are used in remedies for stomach ailments and diabetes. Studies have also indicated that the berries may be helpful in treating heart conditions, blood disorders and digestive ailments. The fruit are an ingredient used today by the pharmaceutical industry particularly in medicines for circulatory disorders and for night vision deficiency.

It is the birthday flower for 17th July.