

Vaccinium vitis-idaea

[Synonyms : *Rhodococcum vitis-idaea*, *Vaccinium jesoense*, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* var. *genuinum*, *Vitis-idaea punctata*, *Vitis-idaea vitis-idaea*]

COWBERRY is an evergreen shrub. Native to Alaska, Greenland, Canada and northern and central Europe (including Britain) it has small pink-tinged, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Airelle à fruits rouges* (French), *Airelle rouge* (French), Alpine cranberry, *Brusinka* (Czech), *Brusinka obecná* (Czech), *Bruslinky* (Czech), *Brusnica čučoriedka pravá* (Slovak), *Brusnica pravá* (Slovak), *Brusnice brusinka* (Czech), *Brusnika* (Russian), *Bruznika* (Polish), Bunchberry, *Canche* (French), *Červené borůvky* (Czech), Clusterberry, Cranberry, Crowberry, Dry cranberry, Flowering box, Foxberry, Grape of Mount Ida, Highland cranberry, *Kaliny* (Czech), *Keadya-atchin* (Irish Gaelic), *Kronsbeere* (German), *Kröson* (Swedish), *Kyselinky* (Czech), Lignonberry, Lingberry, Lingen, *Lingon* (Swedish), Lingonberry, *Llus y Geifr* (Welsh), Low-bush cranberry, *Moonog* (Irish Gaelic), *Mortella rossa* (Italian), Mountain berry, Mountain cranberry, Partridge berry, *Preisselbeere* (German), *Puolukka* (Finnish), Red bilberry, Red huckleberry, Red whortleberry, Rock berry, Rock cranberry, Teeterberry, Upland cranberry, Whimberry, Whortleberry, Windberry, Wineberry, and Woods cranberry.

Cowberry leaves have been confused with those of the bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*, which do not have the glandular brown dots beneath or the fine teeth) and of box (*Buxus sempervirens*) which has a notch cut at the tip).

Vitis-idaea is made up of Latin *vitis* (vine) and reference to Mount Ida meaning ‘vine from Mount Ida on the island of Crete (or occasionally of or from Asia Minor)’ – where the plant cannot actually be found growing.

The small glossy dark red berries provided food for many groups on the North American Continent including some of the Tanana Indian tribe. They and some of the Alaskan Inuits added them to savoury dishes and used them to make puddings. Some of the Tanana Indians also made the berries into preserves, as did Arctic Inuits and the Alaskans themselves. Some of the Alaskan Inuits also used them in sauces, and the Alaskans, some of the Tanana Indians, the Carrier Indian tribe and the Arctic Inuits all used the fruit for making jam. Quite a few groups processed the berries in various ways so that they could be stored for Winter use, not least some of the Alaskan Inuits, the Arctic Inuits, some of the Tanana Indians, the Koyukon Indian tribe and the Alaskans themselves. Arctic Inuits made the fruit juice into what is said to have been a refreshing drink.

Some of the North American Tanana Indian tribe put faith in medicinal qualities in the plant. They believed the berries (or their juice) were beneficial in treating colds, coughs and sore throats.

In the kitchen the fruit are cooked exactly like cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) particularly in sauces and jellies, although it is said by some authorities that additional pectin is needed.

Cowberry is an emblem of the Scottish MacLeod clan.

The whole plant is used today by the tanning industry in Iceland, Russia and Sweden especially for preparing fine leathers.

Both the black bear in Canada and the polar bear in the Arctic enjoy the fruit.

Medicinally, authorities note that cowberry can be used as a more pleasant alternative to bearberry if double the quantity of leaves is used. In the past it has been recommended as a treatment for diarrhoea and rheumatic ailments.