

Viburnum opulus

[Synonyms : *Sambucus aquatica*, *Sambucus rosea*, *Viburnum opulus* var. *americanum*, *Viburnum opulus* subsp. *opulus*]

GUELDER ROSE is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to North Africa, northern Asia, to Europe (including Britain) and North America, it has small scented, snow-white flowers and leaves that turn red-purple in Autumn.

It is also known as *Bach-Holder* (German), Black haw, *Boule-de-neige* (French), Bush rose, Club bunches, *Corswigen* (Welsh), Cramp bark, Cranberry, Cranberry tree, Dog berries, Dog ellow, Dog rowan tree, Dog tree, Dogwood, European cranberry bush, European guelder rose, Gaitre berry, Gatterbush, Gatterridge, *Gelderse roos* (Dutch), *Gemeiner Schneeball* (German), *Gewöhnlicher Schneeball* (German), *Heisi* (Finnish), Highbush cranberry, High cranberry, *Kalina obečná* (Czech), *Kalina obyčajná* (Slovak), *Kalina planá* (Czech), King's crown, Love-roses, Marsh elder, May ball, May rose, Mugget rose, *Mundillos* (Spanish), *Novelleiro* (Portuguese), *Olvon* (Swedish), *Opulo* (Esperanto), *Pallon di maggio* (Italian), Pimbina, Pincushion tree, Queen's cushion, Queen's pincushion, Red elder, *Rosa de gueldres* (Spanish, Portuguese), *Rose de Gueldre* (French), Rose elder, *Schlinge* (German), Silver bells, *Skogsolvon* (Swedish), Snowball tree, Snow toss, Squawbush, Stink tree, Summer berry, Tisty tosty, Traveller's joy, *Ulvtry* (Swedish), *Viorne-obier* (French), *Wasserschneeball* (German), Water elder, Wayfaring tree, White ash, White dogwood, White elder, White ellow, Whitsun bosses, Whitsun rose, Whitten tree, Wild guelder rose, and Wild pincushion tree; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of age, 'age, though still young in heart and spirit', bound, and winter.

Warning – the fresh uncooked berries may cause stomach upsets for some people. (Despite this warning it should be noted that no official records of poisoning exist in Britain.)

This plant is not a rose (*Rosa*).

Opulus was a Latin name for a kind of maple.

The name Guelder comes from the town named Guelders on the Dutch/German border in the Netherlands from where this plant was incorrectly believed to have originated. Guelder rose is said to have been first cultivated in the Dutch province of Gueldersland and is believed to have been introduced to England from there in the 16th Century as 'Gueldres rose'.

This plant has made its mark in literature. The 14th Century English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1345-1400) who knew guelder rose as gaitre berry tree, described the flower and recommended its fruit. Then across the Channel in more recent times the flower was extravagantly depicted by the celebrated French writer, Marcel Proust (1871-1922).

The small glossy, purple-red berries although thought to cause stomach upsets when raw (this has never been proved officially) have been cooked like a poor version of cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) particularly in Canada. In Scandinavian countries and Siberia they are distilled into a liqueur, and in Russia a brandy *nastoika* made from the berries is taken for peptic ulcers. The Japanese on the other hand prepare the fruit as a vinegar to be taken as a remedy for cirrhosis of the liver. The berries have also provided the flavouring for a traditional Scandinavian paste made from honey and flour.

These fruit are the source of a fabric dye and they have been used to make ink. The wood has been fashioned into skewers.

In North America children in the Winnebago, Ponca, Dakota, Omaha and Pawnee tribes all used the stems (less their pith) for popguns when elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) stems were scarce.

The berries were eaten by the Iroquois, some of the Chippewa Indians and the Shuswap tribe – and the latter used them to make preserves.

Some North American Indian tribes used the plant for treating fluid retention. Both Penobscot and Micmac tribes prescribed a berry infusion for glandular problems including mumps, the Iroquois valued it for liver disorders and blood diseases, and it provided the Meskwaki with a remedy for pain. Montagnais Indians eased sore eyes with an ointment containing a plant decoction.

In the mid-west state of Iowa in the USA it was believed that if guelder rose flowered in the Autumn there would be a death before the year was out.

Although apparently it was a popular medicinal plant in North America by the early 19th Century, it never received similar attention in northern and western Europe.

Herbalists have recommended use of a decoction of the bark in the past (apparently successfully) as a remedy for some nervous disorders and for treating cramps and spasms (including convulsions and lock-jaw) and also for rheumatism and some heart disease.

Today it is still formally recognized as a medicinal plant in Poland, Romania and Russia, and the bark essence is used in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 29th September.