

RED HUCKLEBERRY

Vaccinium parvifolium Sm.

Plant Symbol = VAPA

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center



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Alternate Names

Red bilberry, red whortleberry

Uses

Red huckleberries are edible and widely used today for pies, jams, jellies, and are frozen or canned. A wine can be made from the fruit. Red huckleberries are quite tart, so some people prefer the blue huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*). The berries can be dried, mashed, or pressed for juice. The leaves can be used fresh or dried to make tea. Red huckleberry makes an attractive and versatile ornamental. Sometimes, the branches are used for floral arrangements.

Red huckleberries are an important fruit and were used by virtually all groups within the range of the plant, including the Skallam, Lummi, Makah, Quileute, Quinault, Skagit, Skokomish, Snohomish, Swinomish, and tribes throughout western British Columbia. The berries were eaten fresh or pressed

into cakes and dried for the winter. The Lower Chinook and Lummi preferred the berries raw, rather than drying them. Other first people dried the berries. Like other fruits, huckleberries were often eaten with some type of oil or animal/fish grease, and were often mixed with other berries, such as salal (*Gaultheria shallon*). The berries, instead of being picked individually, are usually brushed or combed from the twigs. Some people harvested the berries by clubbing the branches on the hand and letting the ripe berries fall into a basket.

The Skagit boil the bark for a tea for colds. The leaves and finely chopped stem contain quinic acid, a former therapeutic for gout said to inhibit uric acid formation, but never widely used because of mixed clinical results. The leaves have been widely used to lower or modify blood sugar levels, particularly in Europe. Taken on a regular basis, huckleberry tea will gradually help alleviate both glycosuria and hyperglycemia and has a benign, but useful effect as an adjunct treatment to diabetes mellitus.

Wildlife. Huckleberry fruits are an important food source for songbirds, gulls, cranes, pigeons, turkeys, and upland game birds. Many mammals, from black bears to mice, feed on red huckleberries. Herbivores graze on the entire plant. It appears to be a favorite browse of deer. Huckleberries and blueberries form a major part of the grizzly's and black bear's diet in late summer and fall. Grouse feast on the leaves and blossoms. The fruit, twigs, and foliage are eaten by foxes, opossums, raccoons, squirrels, deer, moose, caribou, elk, pikas, cottontail rabbits, and skunks.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

General: Heath Family (Ericaceae). Red huckleberry is a deciduous shrub from 1-4 m tall, with strongly angled twigs and bright green stems. The 10-25 mm leaves are elliptic to ovate, thin, and with a sharp point at the tip. The flowers are greenish to pinkish, and the blossoms are solitary in the axils of the lowest leaves of the youngest shoots. The berries are bright red.

Distribution: For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. It grows from southeast Alaska to central California, Oregon, and Washington. It occurs in the lower Cascades to the coast.

Habitat: Red huckleberry grows on old decaying stumps or logs in moist coniferous woods, wetlands, or in the transition zone of wetlands. It is absent or scarce in dry woods. It is very shade tolerant. Red huckleberry is one of the most frequent pioneering species on old stumps in association with western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) seedlings.

Establishment

Red huckleberry is best grown from seed or by layering. It requires excessive drainage and acidic soils to become established. It does best in full or partial shade. It may tolerate morning and winter sun. Red huckleberry sprouts after plants are damaged. Take cuttings from stems in the winter, during the dormant season. It does not salvage well, so transplanting may result in high mortality.

Management

This plant grows very rapidly in moist, shady conditions. If summer drought occurs, the plants should be watered so roots are kept fairly moist. For the Hesquiat Indians of Vancouver Island, stumps of old conifers become tended gardens for red huckleberry and salal berry orchards (Turner and Efrat 1982).

Traditional resource management of this plant includes the following: 1) occasional burning to stimulate new growth; 2) pruning the branches after picking the berries to stimulate new growth and fruit production the next growing season; and 3) ownership of red huckleberry shrubs provides the basis for careful tending and sustainable yield of valued resources.

Seeds and Plant Production

Collect fruit when berries are ripe (they should be bright red). Fruit ripens from July to August and is easily collected by hand picking or by beating the bush over a large bucket. Following collection, chill the fruit to 10 degrees C for several days. Clean the seeds by macerating and floating off the pulp and unsound seed. Clean the seeds carefully, since they are miniscule, so you may want to use cheesecloth to strain the seed from the pulp.

Seeds dried at 15-21 degrees C for two days can be stored in a refrigerator for up to 12 years. Fresh seed not planted in the fall may germinate better if cold

stratified for 1-3 months. Stored seed germinates well when exposed to alternating temperature and light regimes of 28 degrees C for 14 hours of day (light) and at 13 degrees C for 10 hours of dark.

Fresh or stored and cold-stratified seeds can be sown directly into flats or small pots (a salt shaker can be used for sowing). Plant in a mixture of sand and peat moss. Seedlings will begin to emerge in a month and will continue to emerge for quite some time thereafter. Transplant seedlings into larger pots 6-7 weeks after emergence. Plant outside after the first growing season. Water as needed. Seeds are very slow to sprout and seedlings are small and grow very slowly. Seeds per kilogram: 5,268,955 – 7,142,860 (Crossley 1974).

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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