

GROUSE HUCKLEBERRY

Vaccinium scoparium Leib. Ex
Coville
Plant Symbol = VASC

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center



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Alternate Names

Littleleaf huckleberry, whortleberry, grouse whortleberry, red huckleberry

Uses

Ethnobotany. The small berries are eaten by the Mlaka'-pamus in British Columbia, and the Okanagan-Colville and Kootenay people in the Pacific Northwest. The berries are picked with a comb and usually eaten fresh. However, berries are gathered less commonly in modern times due to their size and the limited number produced. Like the wild strawberries, the tiny red fruits are sweet and delicious and well worth the effort. They are also used by backpackers.

Grouse huckleberry is sometimes used horticulturally, due to its bright green stems, pretty pink flowers and red fruits, and tolerance to a wide range of light levels.

Wildlife. For several species of grouse, these are among the most important summer and early fall foods. They are also important to songbirds, chipmunks, mice, and other mammals. Grouse huckleberry is not a favorable browse due to its small size. However, small mammals, such as rabbits, browse freely on the plants.

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). Littleleaf huckleberry is a small, broom-like, U.S. native, deciduous shrub <5 dm tall. The twigs are strongly angled and green. The leaves are 8-15 mm, ovate, and serrate. The flowers are solitary, urn-shaped, pink blossoms in the axils of the lowest leaves and youngest shoots. The bright red berry is tiny, 3-6 mm in diameter.

Distribution: For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. Grouse huckleberry ranges from Alaska south to California, northern New Mexico, the Rocky Mountains, and Alberta. It can be found from 760-2300 m in the Pacific Northwest, from 1800-2300 m in California, and from 2600-3800 m in Colorado. This plant is rare in California.

Habitat: Grouse huckleberry grows in rocky subalpine to alpine woods to open slopes. It grows in acidic soils in both moist and dry sites, but is most common in sandy or gravelly loams and is always found in the understory of lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) stands.

Establishment

Grouse huckleberry can be propagated by rhizome cuttings. Seed collections: The berries ripen from late July through September. After collection, place the berries in a plastic bag and keep them at 5 degrees C from a few days to a few weeks. Clean seed by macerating and floating the pulp and unsound seed off the top. Seed should be dried before storing. One study reported best germination with a cold stratification with warm night temperatures of 10 degrees C. Seed reportedly does not need pretreatment to germinate.

Seeds are very slow to sprout and seedlings are small and grow very slowly. Fresh or stored 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 a long period thereafter. Transplant seedlings into larger pots 6 to 7 weeks after emergence. Plant outside after the first growing season. Water plants, as needed.

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. 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 huckleberry shrubs provides the basis for careful tending and sustainable yield of valued resources.

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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