

EVERGREEN HUCKLEBERRY

Vaccinium ovatum Pursh
Plant Symbol = VAOV2

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center & Oregon Plant Materials Center



Alfred Brousseau
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Alternate Names

California huckleberry, shot huckleberry, huckleberry, winter huckleberry, evergreen huckleberry

Uses

Ethnobotanic: Tribes in British Columbia and western Washington use the berries of evergreen huckleberry. These tribes include the Sechelt, Comox, Straits, Halkomelem, Lower Nlaka'pamux Salish, Nuu-chah-nulth (Vancouver Island's West Coast), and the Quinault of Washington. Evergreen huckleberries were well liked and people often traveled great distances to obtain them. The berries ripen late in the year, around October or November. They are the last fruits to be gathered in the season round and are said to be even tastier after freezing. The berries are eaten fresh, usually with oil. The berries are also sun or smoke dried, partly mashed, pressed into cake form, and wrapped in leaves or bark. Today they are made into jam or used in cooking.

The leaves and berries are high in vitamin C. The leaves and finely chopped stems 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. Many herbalists maintain that huckleberry leaf tea may be useful in

stabilizing blood sugar levels in cases of diabetes, and medical research has shown that consumption of the leaf extract decreases blood sugar levels shortly after administration. Taken on regular basis, huckleberry tea will gradually help alleviate both glycosuria and hyperglycemia and appears to have a beginning, but useful effect as an adjunct treatment to diabetes mellitus. The leaves are believed also to stimulate appetite, and have astringent and antiseptic qualities that are useful in urinary disorders.

Horticulture: Evergreen huckleberry is an excellent horticultural choice due to its beautiful, glossy, evergreen foliage and tolerance of a wide range of light levels. The foliage is often used in flower arrangements.

Wildlife & Livestock: The foliage of evergreen huckleberry is browsed by elk and deer. Flowers attract butterflies. For several species of grouse, huckleberries are among the most important summer and early fall foods. Berries are eaten by chipmunks, black bear, mice, scarlet tanagers, bluebirds, thrushes, and other songbirds. Deer and rabbit browse freely on the plants. Because of their food value to wildlife and their dense shrubby growth, evergreen huckleberry is worthy of inclusion in hedgerows.

In some localities goats and deer crop evergreen huckleberry rather closely, utilizing 30 to 40 % of the leafage and current twigs. Sheep crop it somewhat less closely but it enters into their diet to a considerable extent in late summer and autumn. The browse rating is fair to poor for sheep, goats, and deer; poor to useless to cattle; and useless for horses.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status, such as, state noxious status and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Heath Family (Ericaceae). This erect, evergreen shrub is stout, from 0.5-3 m tall. The glossy green leaf blades are 2-5 cm, ovate, leathery, serrate, with glandular hairs on the lower surface. The umbel-like inflorescence emerges from the leaf axils. Urn-shaped flowers are bright pink. The berries are 6-9 mm, purplish-black. Evergreen huckleberry does not generally root easily.

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. Evergreen huckleberry grows from the west side of the Cascades in Washington to the coast of British Columbia, to the redwood area of California. It is sporadic south to Santa Barbara, California and in the coast ranges to the central Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Establishment

Adaptation:
Vaccinium ovatum grows in edges and clearings of coniferous woods, at elevations from 3-800 m. Evergreen huckleberry can also be found near beaches in the salt spray zone. This huckleberry grows in moist to slightly dry soils. It will grow in full sun to full shade, although the plants prefer some shade.



Jeanne Russell Janish
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Propagation: Evergreen huckleberry can be difficult to propagate or transplant, but it is available in some nurseries. It can be grown from cuttings, from seed, or by layering. Huckleberry cuttings should be taken while the plant is dormant, from November to April. Their rooting success is fairly sporadic.

Evergreen huckleberry requires excessive drainage and acidic soils to become established. It does best in full or partial shade; it may tolerate morning and winter sun.

Live Plant Collections: Evergreen huckleberry is propagated by cuttings from fully matured shoots taken in fall and winter, when the plant is dormant. Cuttings made from the previous year's growth taken the third week in April rooted 100% (Vancouver, B.C.). Application of 0.3 to 0.4% IBA talc to the freshly cut stem surface and basal heat (21°C; 70° F) to potted plants will enhance rooting.

Young plants can be salvaged, but they should be transplanted when they are less than one foot tall. Frequently, these small plants will turn out to be new shoots of a mature plant reviving from deer browsing or logging, and will die from lack of roots.

Seed Collections: Berries should be collected when they are ripe (from August to September or later). The blue-black fruit is easily collected by hand picking or by beating the bush over a large bucket. Following collection, chill the fruit at 10°C for several days. Clean seeds by macerating and floating off the pulp and unsound seed. Clean seeds carefully; they are minuscule, so you may want to use pantyhose or cheesecloth to strain the seed from the pulp.

Seeds dried at 15-21°C for two days can be stored in a refrigerator for up to 12 years. Fresh seeds not planted in the fall may germinate better if cold stratified for 1-3 months. Stored seeds germinates well when exposed to alternating temperature and light regimes of 28°C light for 14 hours a day and 13°C dark for 10 hours.

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 a long period thereafter. Transplant seedlings into larger pots 6 to 7 weeks after emergence. Plant outside after the first growing season. Seedlings are slow growing, and it may take 2-3 years for a nursery-sized plant to develop.

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: This 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.

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

This species is readily available from native plant nurseries within its range. 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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