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*Edible, medicinal and useful plants
for a healthier world*

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Database Name:

Vaccinium myrtillus - L.

Keyword:

Bilberry

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Author	L.	Botanical references	11, 17, 200
Family	Ericaceae	Genus	Vaccinium
Synonyms			
Known Hazards	None known		
Range	Europe, including Britain, from Iceland south and east to Spain, Macedonia, the Caucasus and N. Asia		
Habitat	Heaths, moors and woods on acid soils to 1250 metres [17, 186].		
Edibility Rating	 4 (1-5)	Medicinal Rating	 3 (1-5)

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Physical Characteristics



A deciduous Shrub growing to 0.2m by 0.3m.

It is hardy to zone 3. It is in flower from April to June, and the seeds ripen from July to September. The flowers are hermaphrodite (have both male and female organs) and are pollinated by Bees, flies, Lepidoptera (Moths & Butterflies). The plant is self-fertile. It is noted for attracting wildlife.

The plant prefers light (sandy) and medium (loamy) soils and requires well-drained soil. The plant prefers acid soils and can grow in very acid soil. It can grow in semi-shade (light woodland) or no shade. It requires moist soil. The plant can tolerate strong winds but

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not maritime exposure.

Habitats

Woodland Garden; Sunny Edge; Dappled Shade;

Edible Uses

Edible Parts: [Fruit](#).

Edible Uses: [Tea](#).

Fruit - raw or cooked[183]. Sweet and very tasty[2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13], they make an excellent preserve, their small seeds making them suitable for jam[4]. A slightly acid flavour when eaten raw[4]. The fruit can be dried and used like currants[12]. The fruit is up to 10mm in diameter[200]. A tea is made from the leaves[4, 177, 183].

Medicinal Uses

[Antiseptic](#); [Astringent](#); [Diuretic](#); [Kidney](#); [Ophthalmic](#); [Tonic](#).

The dried leaves of bilberries are used in the treatment of a variety of complaints[4]. These leaves should be harvested in early autumn, only green leaves being selected, and then dried in gentle heat[4]. The leaves should not be used medicinally for more than 3 weeks at a time[254]. A tea made from the dried leaves is strongly astringent, diuretic, tonic and an antiseptic for the urinary tract[4]. It is also a remedy for diabetes if taken for a prolonged period[4]. Another report says that the leaves can be helpful in pre-diabetic states but that they are not an alternative to conventional treatment[254]. The leaves contain glucoquinones, which reduce the levels of sugar in the blood [238]. A decoction of the leaves or bark is applied locally in the treatment of ulcers and in ulceration of the mouth and throat[4]. A distilled water made from the leaves is an excellent eyewash for soothing inflamed or sore eyes[7]. Whilst the fresh fruit has a slightly laxative effect upon the body, when dried it is astringent and is commonly used in the treatment of diarrhoea etc[4, 7, 254]. The dried fruit is also antibacterial and a decoction is useful for treating diarrhoea in children[254]. The skin of the fruits contains anthocyanin and is specific in the treatment of hemeralopia (day-blindness)[7]. The fruit is a rich source of anthocyanosides, which have been shown experimentally to dilate the blood vessels[238], this makes it a potentially valuable treatment for varicose veins, haemorrhoids and capillary fragility[254].

Other Uses

[Dye](#); [Ink](#).

A green dye is obtained from the leaves and the fruit and is used to colour fabrics[7]. A blue or black dye is obtained from the fruit[100, 141]. This can be used as an ink[66].

Cultivation details

Requires a moist but freely-draining lime free soil, preferring one that is rich in peat or a light loamy soil with added leaf-mould[11, 200]. Prefers a very acid soil with a pH in the range of 4.5 to 6, plants soon become chlorotic when lime is present. Succeeds in full sun or light shade though it fruits better in a sunny position[17, 200]. Dislikes root disturbance, plants are best grown in pots until being planted out in their permanent positions[200]. Tolerates some shade, succeeding in light woodland. Very tolerant of wind and exposure[186]. Plants do not always do well in sheltered positions and they fruit better in an exposed position[115]. They can also form the ground layer in acid woods[186]. A freely suckering shrub when growing well[182]. Plants quickly regenerate from below ground level if they are burnt and also tolerate some grazing[186]. One report says the plant is self-sterile [3], another that it is self-fertile[17]. The fruits are relished by wildlife and the plants provide food for a number of insect species [186]. Plants in this genus are notably resistant to honey fungus[200].

Propagation

Seed - sow late winter in a greenhouse in a lime-free potting mix and only just cover the seed[78]. Stored seed might require a period of up to 3 months cold stratification[113]. Another report says that it is best to sow the seed in a greenhouse as soon as it is ripe[200]. Once they are about 5cm tall, prick the seedlings out into individual pots and grow them on in a lightly shaded position in the greenhouse for at least their first winter. Plant them out into their permanent positions in late spring or early summer, after the last expected frosts. Cuttings of half-ripe wood, 5 - 8cm with a heel, August in a frame[78]. Slow and difficult. Cuttings of mature wood in late autumn. Layering in late summer or early autumn[78]. Another report says that spring is the best time to layer[200]. Takes 18 months[78]. Division of suckers in spring or early autumn[113].

Links

References

[2] **Hedrick. U. P.** *Sturtevant's Edible Plants of the World*. Dover Publications 1972 ISBN 0-486-20459-6

Lots of entries, quite a lot of information in most entries and references.

[3] **Simmons. A. E.** *Growing Unusual Fruit*. David and Charles 1972 ISBN 0-7153-5531-7

A very readable book with information on about 100 species that can be grown in Britain (some in greenhouses) and details on how to grow and use them.

[4] **Grieve.** *A Modern Herbal*. Penguin 1984 ISBN 0-14-046-440-9
Not so modern (1930's?) but lots of information, mainly temperate plants.

- [5] **Mabey. R.** *Food for Free*. Collins 1974 ISBN 0-00-219060-5
Edible wild plants found in Britain. Fairly comprehensive, very few pictures and rather optimistic on the desirability of some of the plants.
- [7] **Chiej. R.** *Encyclopaedia of Medicinal Plants*. MacDonald 1984 ISBN 0-356-10541-5
Covers plants growing in Europe. Also gives other interesting information on the plants. Good photographs.
- [8] **Ceres.** *Free for All*. Thorsons Publishers 1977 ISBN 0-7225-0445-4
Edible wild plants in Britain. Small booklet, nothing special.
- [9] **Launert. E.** *Edible and Medicinal Plants*. Hamlyn 1981 ISBN 0-600-37216-2
Covers plants in Europe. a drawing of each plant, quite a bit of interesting information.
- [11] **Bean. W.** *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in Great Britain. Vol 1 - 4 and Supplement*. Murray 1981
A classic with a wealth of information on the plants, but poor on pictures.
- [12] **Loewenfeld. C. and Back. P.** *Britain's Wild Larder*. David and Charles 0 ISBN 0-7153-7971-2
A handy pocket guide.
- [13] **Triska. Dr.** *Hamlyn Encyclopaedia of Plants*. Hamlyn 1975 ISBN 0-600-33545-3
Very interesting reading, giving some details of plant uses and quite a lot of folk-lore.
- [17] **Clapham, Tootin and Warburg.** *Flora of the British Isles*. Cambridge University Press 1962
A very comprehensive flora, the standard reference book but it has no pictures.
- [66] **Freethy. R.** *From Agar to Zenery*. The Crowood Press 1985 ISBN 0-946284-51-2
Very readable, giving details on plant uses based on the authors own experiences.
- [78] **Sheat. W. G.** *Propagation of Trees, Shrubs and Conifers*. MacMillan and Co 1948
A bit dated but a good book on propagation techniques with specific details for a wide range of plants.
- [100] **Polunin. O.** *Flowers of Europe - A Field Guide*. Oxford University Press 1969 ISBN 0192176218
An excellent and well illustrated pocket guide for those with very large pockets. Also gives some details on plant uses.
- [113] **Dirr. M. A. and Heuser. M. W.** *The Reference Manual of Woody Plant Propagation*. Athens Ga. Varsity Press 1987 ISBN 0942375009

A very detailed book on propagating trees. Not for the casual reader.

[115] **Johnson. C. P.** *The Useful Plants of Great Britain.* 0
Written about a hundred years ago, but still a very good guide to the useful plants of Britain.

[141] **Carruthers. S. P. (Editor)** *Alternative Enterprises for Agriculture in the UK.* Centre for Agricultural Strategy, Univ. of Reading 1986 ISBN 0704909820
Some suggested alternative commercial crops for Britain. Readable. Produced by a University study group.

[177] **Kunkel. G.** *Plants for Human Consumption.* Koeltz Scientific Books 1984 ISBN 3874292169
An excellent book for the dedicated. A comprehensive listing of latin names with a brief list of edible parts.

[182] **Thomas. G. S.** *Ornamental Shrubs, Climbers and Bamboos.* Murray 1992 ISBN 0-7195-5043-2
Contains a wide range of plants with a brief description, mainly of their ornamental value but also usually of cultivation details and varieties.

[183] **Facciola. S.** *Cornucopia - A Source Book of Edible Plants.* Kampong Publications 1990 ISBN 0-9628087-0-9
Excellent. Contains a very wide range of conventional and unconventional food plants (including tropical) and where they can be obtained (mainly N. American nurseries but also research institutes and a lot of other nurseries from around the world.

[186] **Beckett. G. and K.** *Planting Native Trees and Shrubs.* Jarrold 1979
An excellent guide to native British trees and shrubs with lots of details about the plants.

[200] **Huxley. A.** *The New RHS Dictionary of Gardening.* 1992. MacMillan Press 1992 ISBN 0-333-47494-5
Excellent and very comprehensive, though it contains a number of silly mistakes. Readable yet also very detailed.

[238] **Bown. D.** *Encyclopaedia of Herbs and their Uses.* Dorling Kindersley, London. 1995 ISBN 0-7513-020-31
A very well presented and informative book on herbs from around the globe. Plenty in it for both the casual reader and the serious student. Just one main quibble is the silly way of having two separate entries for each plant.

[254] **Chevallier. A.** *The Encyclopedia of Medicinal Plants* Dorling Kindersley. London 1996 ISBN 9-780751-303148
An excellent guide to over 500 of the more well known medicinal herbs from around the world.

Readers Comments

Vaccinium myrtillus

J.Gray - Re: Vaccinium myrtillus website Tue Jul 25 2006

Hello, I am wondering if you might know where I can find a Vaccinium myrtillus seedling supplier that can sell with a phytosanitary certificate? My email is quatesh@slingshot.co.nz Thank you J.Gray

Vaccinium myrtillus

Jackie Read Wed May 9 2007

Hello I am looking to source Vaccinium Myrtillus plants of local provenance, I am based in North wales if anyone can help me, my email is jacrea@ceh.ac.uk Thank-you Jackie

Vaccinium myrtillus

Webster Tue May 29 2007

Anyone know of a source for Vaccinium myrtillus? I Would love to grow it from seedling not from seed. I live in Eastern USA Thank you!

Vaccinium myrtillus

Harold Hudson Fri Dec 7 2007

hello I would like to find the Bilberry (vaccinium myrtillus)I would like to find the plants not the seed. If any one knows where to find them please let me know.I live in Louisiana.my email is heh1220@aol.com thanks Harold Dec.7-07

Vaccinium myrtillus

Davida Mon Dec 10 2007

I would like to find the Bilberry Plant(vaccinium myrtillus). I live in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Any information would be helpful. Thank you.

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