

Literature cited and further reading

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- groundcover or a small shrub up to 0.5 m tall. The plant prefers acidic, moist soil that is well drained, and is often found in very boggy environments. In many environments it can be the dominant shrub species.
- The plants flower soon after the snow melts in the spring. The male and female flowers are maroon coloured and not showy. Staminate flowers have very pronounced stamens and, seemingly out of proportion to the plant size, very large anthers. Pistillate flowers consist of a ring of carpels on the end of what appears to be a small fruit. The berries mature in summer, are typically 7–8 mm in diameter and black, although a range of colours can be found from bright red to black.
- The bland or slightly acidic fruit are very juicy and have high levels of anthocyanin pigments in the skin; they may be eaten raw or processed. The fruit is harvested from wild stands and sold commercially in northern climates. In northern native cultures, the fruit is often harvested all winter long from beneath protective snow layers. Traditionally berries harvested in the autumn were frozen, dried or mixed with meat, fish or fat for storage. Fruit are very commonly combined with other more flavourful berries and fruit-juice blends or wines using crowberry are popular. The fruit is a rich source of pigments that are useful as a natural purple colourant for food products and for their antioxidant health benefits. Leaves, stems and roots were used by native cultures in various concoctions as a cathartic, diuretic, antidiarrheal treatment, and to treat eyes and 'kidney troubles'.
- Where crowberry is adapted it is so common that cultivation is not needed, however, because of its demanding soil and environmental requirements it is difficult to grow outside of its adapted locations although they are occasionally used as a landscape plant, particularly in rock gardens. Chad Finn

Further reading

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ERICACEAE

Arbutus unedo strawberry tree

The strawberry tree or madrone, *Arbutus unedo* L. (Ericaceae), is native to the Mediterranean region of southern Europe with a relict population in Ireland, as well as in North America on the Pacific coast (*Arbutus menziesii* Pursh.) and in the south-western USA and Mexico (*Arbutus texana* Buckley). The attractive evergreen trees tend to be small to medium-sized (8–15 m) and are well adapted to dry, well-drained, acidic soils.

The elliptical leaves, 7–15 cm, are glossy and dark green. The bark is smooth and cinnamon brown and exfoliates as it ages. The hermaphroditic, white flowers open in masses in winter and early spring, and are very attractive to insects, particularly bees.

One of the most common uses of this species is as a nectar plant for honey production by bees. The red-orange fruit ripen in autumn or early winter, and will hang on the plant until the fruit are completely mature or there are hard freezes.

EMPETRACEAE

Empetrum nigrum crowberry

Empetrum nigrum L. (Empetraceae) is most commonly known as crowberry but also curlewberry and in Scandinavia as kraaihei. The species is divided into two subspecies depending on whether a plant produces hermaphroditic flowers (*E. nigrum* ssp. *hermaphroditum*) or is dioecious (*E. nigrum* ssp. *nigrum*).

Crowberry has a circumboreal distribution, growing as far south as northern California in North America. The evergreen shrub has small, needle-like leaves and the plant forms a