



Cultivation Notes

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Bearberry

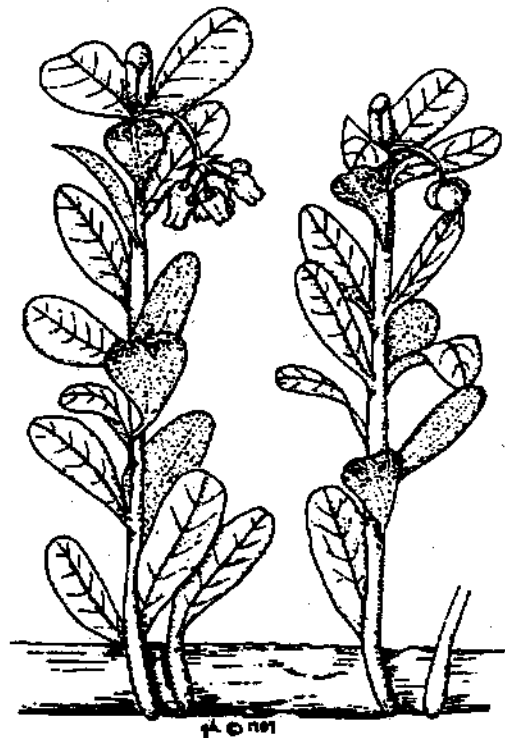
Arctostaphylos uva-ursi (L.) Sprengel
A Rhode Island Native Plant

Family ERICACEAE
by Margaret Stone

Bearberry, also known as Kinnikinnick or Mealberry, is a ground-hugging, trailing shrub to six inches in height. It forms large mats by runners, which root at the joints and seem to flow over the ground and rocks. The evergreen leaves are paddle-shaped, about one-half inch long, smooth, glossy, and dark green. The white, urn-shaped flowers are edged with pink and hang in clusters; they bloom in April, May, and June. The berries, which ripen in August-September, are a glossy bright red and are attractive to birds and, supposedly, bears.

Bearberry is a hardy plant, growing from Labrador to Alaska, and south to Virginia, northern Indiana, New Mexico, and California. It flourishes in gravelly-sandy, acidic soil (pH 4.5-5.5) in full sun. It grows prolifically on Cape Cod and in the New Jersey pine barrens. In Rhode Island it can be found on sandy banks and alongside sandy roads in the company of oaks, pines, and Lowbush Blueberry. In the proper environs it is a tough plant, able to withstand summer heat and drought, the bitter cold of winter, and even salt spray.

The fruit of Bearberry is considered edible but is mealy and bland. For centuries, throughout its range, the dried leaves, harvested in the fall, have been used to make teas that served as tonics and diuretics (Bearberry leaves contain an astringent compound, arbutin, and have been used to treat infections of the urinary tract). The leaves are also high in tannic acid and used for tanning hides. In North America both Native Americans and colonists mixed the dried leaves with tobacco for smoking; the common name "kinnikinnick" is an Algonquian word meaning "mixture," referring to this usage. My own experience growing Bearberry was probably blessed with much good luck. Many years ago I lifted a handful of sand and rooted plants from an old sand-plain road (now paved) to bring home to an *unnatural soil for the plants*. I then layered sandy gravel over yellow dirt fill, laid the roots in, and covered with more sand. The small area is near the top of a retaining wall, not in full sun. The plant is now thriving and spreading; it overhangs the wall and is rooting in pebbles and sand at the bottom. It is always glossy and green (sometimes bronze in the winter) and a pleasure to see.



CULTIVATION NOTES

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi (L.) Sprengel Bearberry

Perennial groundcover forming glossy, evergreen mats, found in dry, sandy areas and rocky gravelly banks. Blooms April-June; fruits are glossy red berries in the autumn.

Propagation

Bearberry does not transplant well because the sand falls away from the roots in the process and exposes them.

From cuttings: Soft wood cuttings 2-5 inches long (some say with a heel of old wood attached) and deeply planted in pots of sand with a little peat, kept moist outdoors or in a cold frame over the winter, should be rooted by spring.

Longer hard-wood cuttings taken in winter may be rooted similarly in the greenhouse. Do not use fertilizer.

By layering: in summer in a sandy soil, perhaps in flats.

Seed collection and treatment: Seed taken from the berries when ripe may be sown 1/2 to 3/4 inches deep in flats of sand and peat, and kept outdoors for two to five years before germination occurs.

RIWPS Policy: Never dig plants in the wild without written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

My own notes:

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- Illustration** by Gretchen Halpert, adapted from *Herbs for All Seasons*, by Sally Freeman.