



Cultivation Note

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Trailing Arbutus

Epigaea repens L.

A Rhode Island Native Plant

Family ERICACEAE (Heath Family)

by Carolyn Curtis



Epigaea repens is one of our choice native plants. The name *Epigaea* is composed of the Greek *epi*, or "upon" and *gaea*, the earth. The word *repens* means "creeping." Arbutus is described by Dr. Irene Stuckey in her book *Rhode Island Wildflowers* as follows: "Exquisite fragrance and a fringe of hairs in the throat characterize the waxy to rose-pink flowers of this dwarf shrub. They bloom in late April, hidden among the rough-textured leaves of the previous years. Leaves are 1 to 2" long with brownish hairs on the undersurface. Arbutus is slow growing, thriving in sandy soil and partial shade."

Trailing Arbutus can often be found growing in mats in the vicinity of Starflower (*Trientalis borealis*) and Lowbush Blueberries (*Vaccinium pallidum* and *Vaccinium angustifolium*). On a steep, north-facing slope on my property I have watched patches of Arbutus multiply and grow for over fifteen years, despite being trampled by deer. Recently I have read that by disturbing the soil, the deer may actually be helping to improve conditions for better seed germination; this would also explain why Arbutus is so frequently to be found along paths and old dirt roads.

Trailing Arbutus grows well in cool, open woods where leafless branches filter spring light and where leaves provide shade later in the season. The soil must be acid with a pH in the 4 to 6 range. Sandy loam rich in humus on top and with a sandy soil below provides good drainage and proper growing conditions for Arbutus. Also deemed beneficial to the plant is a forest floor with decaying leaves or evergreen needles to provide mycorrhizal fungi.

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Dwarf shrub. Waxy white to rose-pink flowers in late April. Slow-growing, creeping habit. Thrives in sandy soil and partial shade. Plant 1 1/2-2 1/2 inches, flower 1/4-1/2 inch.

Seed Collection: After the plant blossoms in late April, a small, round seed pod forms and swells. Watch carefully from mid-June to mid-July because suddenly the sepals curl back to reveal white, fleshy fruit peppered over with tiny brown seeds. Be aware that racing you for this choice delicacy are ants, chipmunks, and mice. Let the fruit dry for about a week in a paper container, and then rub off the fine seed.

Propagation from seed: Fresh seed should be sown immediately using a mix of equal parts loam, peat, sand, and leaf mold. Sometimes germination is speeded by sowing the seed on a 1/2-inch layer of milled sphagnum moss on top of the soil. Sow the seed on the surface and do not cover. Bottom water the container, drain briefly, and seal in a plastic bag. Place in strong light but not in the sun. Germination will likely take place in 4 to 6 weeks. When seedlings become visible, open the plastic bag or remove container. When the slow-growing seedlings attain a growth of one-half inch in diameter, they should be transplanted into individual pots. Continue growing in pots until the root system is well established. It usually takes 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 years to obtain flowering plants from seed.

Propagation by cuttings: This appears to be the method of choice as good results are reported. In early June or when a new leafy shoot has made its full growth, clip the shoot at the base of the new growth. Remove the lowest leaves of the shoot and wrap the cutting in a thick wad of sphagnum moss. Insert this into a pot of 1/2 acid leaf mold or peat and 1/2 sand. Water and allow to drip. Then place the pot in a plastic bag and tie securely. Light must be provided but not direct sun. Roots should form by September. Betty Salomon, who has successfully rooted Arbutus, cautions that the most difficult part of the process is establishing the rooted stock. Keep the individually potted, rooted cuttings in a cold frame for the winter. Avoid root disturbance as much as possible when setting out plants in the spring.

Planting depth: Set rooted stock at soil level and mulch carefully, being certain to keep plants moist until well established.

Comments: **DO NOT DIG PLANTS IN THE WILD. THIS SPECIES IS PROTECTED BY RHODE ISLAND LAW.**

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