

Red Chokeberry

by Gilbert Moore

Aronia arbutifolia

FAMILY: Rosaceae

If you have ever seen the RIWPS exhibit at the Rhode Island Spring Flower and Garden Show you have seen *Aronia*. We use it in our exhibit because it provides early bloom and it is dense enough to provide a good visual impact. It will do that and more in your own garden.

In the wild *Aronia* is found throughout the Northeast, from Massachusetts to Minnesota south to Florida and Texas in various habitats. It is not fussy; it will grow in moist to dry sunny situations, but it prefers well-drained soil rich in organic matter. This multi-stemmed shrub grows from 6 to 10 feet tall. It tends to be leggy in that the bottom of the stems are without branches. It sends up shoots from underground stems and can form a small thicket. The foliage is dark green above, slightly felted on the underside, and thick and leathery. These characteristics make the plant drought-resistant and unattractive to insects. Although the individual flowers are small, a third of an inch across, they are borne in clusters, so they have more visual impact than their size would suggest. Their form is typical of the Rose family: five white petals surrounding many pink anthers. In fall the flowers are followed by small, round, bright red fruits, which are abundant in most years. They are very astringent and, if tasted, cause one to pucker. Hence, the common name, Red Chokeberry. They are not much liked by wildlife but will sometimes be eaten by birds late in the season after the more delectable foods are gone. Before the fruiting is noticeable, the leaves turn a brilliant red and remain on the bush for a couple of weeks.

Cultivation

Aronia is a great shrub for the garden. It requires little care once established. It is resistant to pests and is not bothered by diseases. It is not fussy as to soil but will respond favorably to incorporated organic matter. It provides year-round interest in the landscape with flowers, leaves, autumn color, and colorful fruit in season. As a plant for winter interest, Warren Leach points out that the fruits are more persistent than those of *Ilex verticillata* (Winterberry). One named selection is available, "Brilliantissima," which has larger flowers in larger clusters. The fruits are also bigger and brighter. The leaves are thick and in fall turn a brilliant red. As Michael Dirr writes, "On occasion, it rivals *Euonymus alatus*, Winged Euonymus, for fall color." And it isn't invasive! Its habit of spreading by suckers can be troublesome if it is planted in a restricted area. (Then again, the same can be said of lilacs.) Also, the naked stems can look awkward, but that is easily fixed by underplanting with short, assertive plants. I have mine combined with Hay-scented Fern and Meadowsweet.

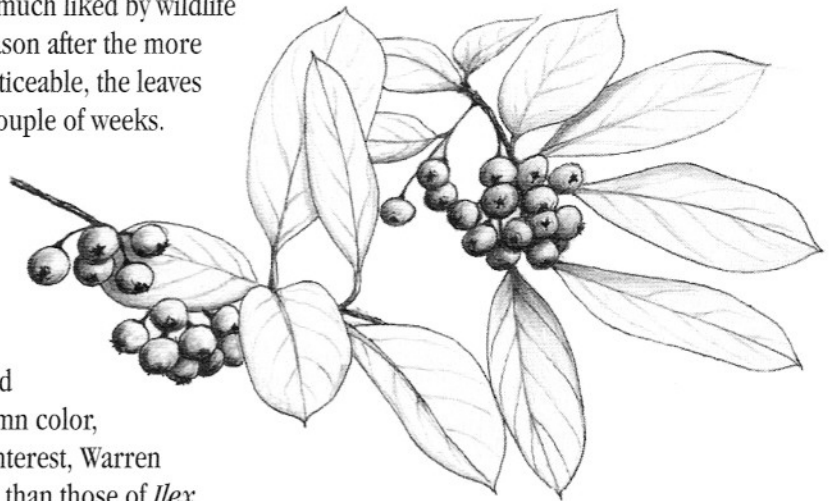


Illustration by Rick Enser

Two other native chokeberries are found in Rhode Island and are occasionally available at nurseries: Black Chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) and Purple Chokeberry (*Aronia prunifolia*); neither is as satisfactory as *Aronia arbutifolia* where brilliant fall foliage and bright red berries are desired.

Propagation

Three methods of propagation are possible. First and easiest is to simply dig up a shoot from near the base of the plant in late winter or early spring and replant it elsewhere.

The second method is to take softwood or semiripe cuttings in late spring or early summer. Take cuttings three to five inches long. Pinch out the soft growing tips. Remove all but the top two or three leaves. Dip the bottom ends in rooting hormone and stick them firmly into a rooting medium. Keep the medium moist and the container out of direct sunlight. To keep the cuttings moist, I put the containers in clear plastic bags until roots form. When the cuttings have rooted, they should be potted up individually and the pots placed in a sheltered spot for the first winter. A cold frame is ideal.

A final method of propagation is from seed. Gather fruit in the fall when ripe. The pulp inhibits seed germination; therefore, the seeds have to be separated out. The easiest way to do this is to layer the fruit in moist sand and to put the container outdoors for the winter. Be careful to keep the sand moist all winter long. The seed also needs to go through alternate freezing and thawing before it will germinate, which happens during the winter spent outdoors. In spring put the softened fruit into a sieve under running water to separate the seeds from the pulp. Mash, swish, and rub them until the seeds are free and clean. The fresh seeds are then planted in the usual manner.

Look for *Aronia* in the wild, at the Flower Show, or in gardens. Buy it at a nursery or propagate your own. It will bring you pleasure all year long.

References:

- American Horticultural Society, Alan Toogood, Ed., 1999. *Plant Propagation*. Dorling Kindersley, NY
Durr, Michael A., 1998. *Durr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs*. Timber Press, Portland, OR.
Kaczorowski, Barbara, "Native Americans: Red Chokeberry." *Horticultural Magazine*, October 1992.
Petrides, George A., 1998. *Trees and Shrubs: Peterson Field Guide*. Houghton Mifflin, NY.

RIWPS Policy

*Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner.
Take seeds sparingly.*

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