Bilberry (Vaccinium myrtillus)
Common Names: Huckleberry, blueberry.

Location: North America and Europe.
Description: The leaf of the bilberry bush is the portion used medicinally.
Uses: This herb can be used for an upset stomach, high blood pressure, atheroclerosis, diabetes, diarrhea, eye disorders, gout, inflammatory joint disease, rheumatoid arthritis, prostatitis, and peptic ulcers.

Doses: Bilberry is available in tablets and in dried form for use in teas.
Warnings: Do not use high doses of bilberry. Do not take bilberry while pregnant. If you are diabetic, monitor your sugars while taking bilberry

Also known as

Vaccinium myrtillus, European blueberry, Airelle, Bilberry Fruit, Bilberry Leaf, Black Whortles, Bleaberry, Blueberry, Burren Myrtle, Dwarf Bilberry, Dyeberry, Huckleberry, Hurtleberry, Myrtilli Fructus, Trackleberry, Whortleberry, Wineberry.

Introduction

Also known as "Black Hearts" according to Thomas Hardy in his 1878 novel The Return of the Native, the European bilberry bush is a close relative of American blueberries, cranberries, and huckleberries. It flourishes in damp acidic soil throughout temperate and sub artic regions of the world. The bilberry has a long history of medicinal use. Hildegard of Bingen wrote 900 years ago to recommend the use of bilberries to treat amenorrhea. Renaissance physicians used bilberries to treat conditions ranging from kidney stones to typhoid fever. Traditionally, strong decoctions have also been used as an astringent for treatment of diarrhea and dysentery. The English used it as a dye for wool due to its wonderful dark blue/purple coloring. The best known application of the herb in modern medicine, however, arose during World War II. British Royal Air Force Pilots reported that a dollop of bilberry jam just before a mission improved their night vision, sometimes dramatically. The American Botanical Council published a paper stating that Bilberry is potentially beneficial for visual problems such as circulatory disorders of the retina: vein and circulatory disorders, including varicose veins, inadequate vein strength, and fragile capillaries.

Constituents

Benzoic acid, caffeic acid, epicatechin, Epigallocatechin (EPCG), gallic acid, hydroquinone, isoquercetin, quercetin.

Parts Used

Leaf, fruit.

Typical Preparations

Dried fruit, jam, as a tea, encapsulated, liqueurs, wines, and desserts.

Summary

After the successful use of bilberry jam in World War II, researchers determined that bilberry fruit and bilberry leaf contain biologically active substances called anthocyanosides. Scientists believe that these chemicals may strengthen the walls of the blood vessels in the eye and benefit the retina, reduce inflammation, and stabilize tissues containing cartilage, such as ligaments and tendons. The herb is also used to treat a variety of conditions that benefit from arterial support, including bruising, hemorrhoids, and varicose veins. The effect of bilberry on night vision is most consistent in people who have poor night vision. The herb probably will not improve night vision in people who already have good night vision. For best results, take bilberry on a regular basis, but also use blueberries, cranberries, elderberries, raspberries, and strawberries to support cardiovascular and retinal health.

Precautions

Bilberry fruit is known to be safe even for pregnant women, although eating too much can cause minor stomach upset. Maximum dosages of bilberry leaf have not been established for nursing mothers, young children, or people with severe liver or kidney disease, but there are no reports of toxicity. A bilberry leaf may lower blood sugars in diabetics. The leaf is not recommended for long term use.

Botanical: Vaccinium myrtillus (LINN.)
Family: N.O. Vacciniaceae

- Description
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---Synonyms---Whortleberry. Black Whortles. Whinberry. Trackleberry. Huckleberry. Hurts. Bleaberry. Hurtleberry. Airelle. Vaccinium Frondosum. Blueberries.
---Parts Used---The ripe fruit. The leaves.
---Habitat---Europe, including Britain, Siberia and Barbary.

---Description---*V. myrtillus* grows abundantly in our heathy and mountainous districts, a small branched shrub, with wiry angular branches, rarely over a foot high, bearing globular wax-like flowers and black berries, which are covered when quite ripe with a delicate grey bloom, hence its name in Scotland, 'Blea-berry,' from an old North Countryword, 'blae,' meaning livid or bluish. The name Bilberry (by some old writers 'Bulberry') is derived from the Danish 'bollebar,' meaning *dark berry*. There is a variety with white fruits.

The leathery leaves (in form somewhat like those of the myrtle, hence its specific name) are at first rosy, then yellowish-green, and in autumn turn red and are very ornamental. They have been utilized to adulterate tea.

Bilberries flourish best on high grounds, being therefore more abundant in the north and west than in the south and east of England: they are absent from the low-lying Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, but on the Surrey hills, where they are called 'Hurts,' cover the ground for miles.

The fruit is globular, with a flat top, about the size of a black currant. When eaten raw, they have a slightly acid flavour. When cooked, however, with sugar, they make an excellent preserve. Gerard tells us that 'the people of Cheshire do eate the black whortles in creame and milke as in these southern parts we eate strawberries.' On the Continent, they are often employed for colouring wine.

Stewed with a little sugar and lemon peel in an open tart, Bilberries make a very enjoyable dish. Before the War, immense quantities of them were imported annually from Holland, Germany and Scandinavia. They were used mainly by pastrycooks and restaurant-keepers.

Owing to its rich juice, the Bilberry can be used with the least quantity of sugar in making jam: half a pound of sugar to the pound of berries is sufficient if the preserve is to be eaten soon. The minuteness of the seeds makes them more suitable for jam than currants.

[Top]

---Constituents---Quinic acid is found in the leaves, and a little tannin. Triturated with water they yield a liquid which, filtered and assayed with sulphate of iron, becomes a beautiful green, first of all transparent, then giving a green precipitate.

The fruits contain sugar, etc.

---Medicinal Action and Uses---The *leaves* can be used in the same way as those of *UvaUrsi*. The *fruits* are astringent, and are especially valuable in diarrhoea and dysentery, in the form of syrup. The ancients used them largely, and Dioscorides spoke highly of them. They are also used for discharges, and as antigalactagogues. A decoction of the leaves or bark of the root may be used as a local application to ulcers, and in ulceration of the mouth and throat.

The fruit is helpful in scurvy and urinary complaints, and when bruised with the roots and steeped in gin has diuretic properties valuable in dropsy and gravel. A tea made of the leaves is also a remedy for diabetes if taken for a prolonged period.

---Dosages---Of powder of the berries, 4 grammes. Of syrup, 60 grammes to a litre of water. Of fluid extract, 1/2 to 2 drachms.

---Other Species---*V. arboreum*, or Farkleberry. This is the most astringent variety, and both berries and root-bark may be used internally for diarrhoea, chronic dysentery, etc. The infusion is valuable as a local application in sore throat, chronic ophthalmia, leucorrhoea, etc.

V. resinosum, V. damusum, and *V. gorymbosum* have properties resembling those of *V. myrtillus*.

The Bog Bilberry (*V. uliginosum*) is a smaller, less erect plant, with round stems and untoothed leaves, greyish green beneath. Both flowers and berries are smaller than those of the common Bilberry. This kind is quite absent in the south and only to be found in mountain bogs and moist copses, in Scotland, Durham and Westmorland.

The berries of both species are a favourite food of birds.

The 'Huckleberry' of North America, so widely appreciated there, is our Bilberry - the name being an obvious corruption of 'Whortleberry.'

[Top]

RECIPE

---Recipe for Bilberry Jam---
Put 3 lb. of clean, fresh fruit in a preserving pan with 1 1/2 lb. of sugar and about 1 cupful of water and bring to the boil. Then boil rapidly for 40 minutes. Apple juice made from windfalls and peelings, instead of the water, improves this jam. To make apple juice, cover the apples with water, stew down, and strain the juice through thick muslin. Blackberries may also be added to this mixture.

If the jam is to be kept long it must be bottled hot in screw-top jars, or, if tied down in the ordinary way, more sugar must be added.

Bilberry juice yields a clear, dark-blue or purple dye that has been much used in the dyeing of wool and the picking of berries for this purpose, as well as for food, constitutes a summer industry in the 'Hurts' districts. Owing to the shortage of the aniline dyestuffs formerly imported from Germany, Bilberries were eagerly bought up at high prices by dye manufacturers during the War, so that in 1917 and 1918 a large proportion of the Bilberry crop was not available for jam-making, as the dyers were scouring the country for the little blue-black berries.