

Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)

Common Names: Checkerberry, spiceberry, teaberry.

Location: Wintergreen is an aromatic, creeping shrub native to the eastern United States.

Description: It has leathery, oval leaves, small pink or white bell-shaped flowers, and bright-red fruit. The berries are used medicinally, and an essential oil is distilled from the herb's glossy green leaves. The oil was once popular as a flavoring in candies, toothpastes, and food, and as an aromatic agent in perfumes.

Properties: Native Americans brewed a tea from the leaves to alleviate rheumatic symptoms, headache, fever, sore throat, and various aches and pains. During the American Revolution, wintergreen leaves were used as a substitute for tea, which was then scarce.

Uses: Wintergreen has pain-relieving properties similar to those of aspirin, as well as a refreshing taste. It is good for headaches, arthritis, and muscle pain. Regularly applied to painfully swollen, inflamed, or sore muscles and joints, especially if caused by injuries or rheumatic ailments, the essential oil helps to relieve pain. Benefits of wintergreen for specific health conditions include treatment of the following: carpal tunnel syndrome, sore muscles and joints, and toothache. Wintergreen also contains astringent compounds, called tannins, and a soothing and softening substance called mucilage. They help indirectly to alleviate soreness in muscles and joints, and explain why this herb was traditionally used as a gargle for sore throats.

Doses: Wintergreen is available as a mouthwash and as an essential oil. The essential oil should be used for external use only.

Warnings: Wintergreen oil can be harmful if taken internally. If pure wintergreen oil is ingested by a child, one teaspoon can be fatal. Essential oil of wintergreen should be used externally only, and only for acute pain, since it can be absorbed through the skin and can become toxic to the kidneys and liver. You should not apply the oil to your skin for more than three days out of any month, and you should not use wintergreen oil if you have any degree of chronic kidney or liver disease. You should not apply the oil to the skin of a child under the age of twelve unless directed to do so by a medical professional.

Formulations containing concentrations of 10- to 60-percent methyl salicylate can be applied externally up to four times daily. They should not be used after strenuous exercise or in conjunction with a heating pad, however. Follow package instructions and avoid applying these products after vigorous exercise or in hot weather. Doing so can result in dangerous amounts of certain compounds being absorbed through your skin and into your system. If you take warfarin (Coumadin) or any other prescription blood-thinning medication, do not use wintergreen, as bleeding problems and other adverse reactions may occur. People taking blood-thinning medication should avoid using any products that contain methyl salicylate.