

Pacific Northwest *Vaccinium* species

Which huckleberry species to use for medicinal purposes?

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Worldwide there are about 450 species of *Vaccinium*. Most books on herbal medicine only refer to the European species *Vaccinium myrtillus*, most commonly known as European Bilberry. *V. myrtillus* is a widespread circumboreal species and besides northern Europe is also found in northern Asia and in North America including from southern British Columbia down through the east Cascades to the Wenatchee Mountains, and from Alberta south along the Rockies to Colorado. *Flora of the Northwest* lists 14 native species of *Vaccinium*, and 14 species occur in British Columbia. *V. uliginosum* is another circumboreal species mentioned in European herbals.

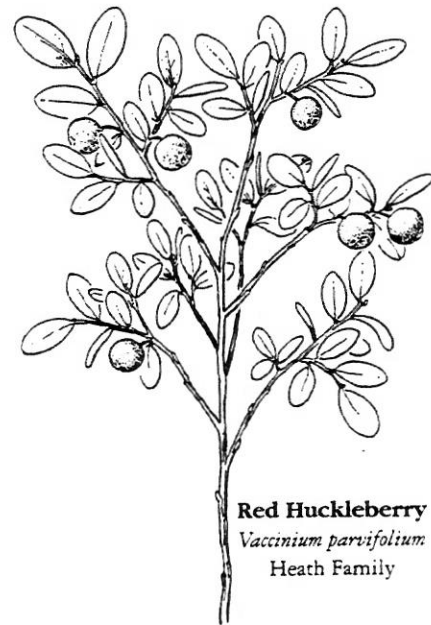
I have 8 species listed in my 1/11/2000 edition of Northwest Natives with Known Medicinal Properties.

Vaccinium macrocarpon (Cranberry)
Vaccinium myrtillus (Bilberry)
Vaccinium ovatum (Evergreen Huckleberry)
Vaccinium oxycoccus (Wild Cranberry)
Vaccinium parviflorum (Red Huckleberry)
Vaccinium membranaceum (Big Huckleberry)
Vaccinium scoparium (Grouse Whortleberry)
Vaccinium uliginosum (Bog Blueberry)

Perhaps all *Vaccinium* have medicinal properties. Which are best? Some of our native species may be as efficacious or even better than *Vaccinium myrtillus*, but time and further laboratory and clinical trials will tell. What little I do know sounds promising. I have seen one laboratory analysis comparing some of the Northwest *Vaccinium* and some were as high or higher in desired constituents than *V. myrtillus*.

V. scoparium is the northwest *Vaccinium* which most closely resembles *V. myrtillus*, taxonomically as well as in appearance. In fact, at one time *V. scoparium* was classified as *V. myrtillus* var. *microphyllum*. Here is what A.F. Szczawinski had to say about these two species in *The Heather Family of British Columbia*, British Columbia Provincial Museum Handbook No. 19, 1962.

"*Vaccinium myrtillus*: Low bilberry is superficially similar to grouseberry (*V. scoparium*), from which it is separated by its more open habit (not broomy) and by its branches, which usually have puberulent grooves. As a rule the leaves of the low bilberry are larger, as is also the case with the flowers. The berries, which are bright red in grouseberry, in this species are



Red Huckleberry
Vaccinium parviflorum
Heath Family

very dark red to bluish. Generally speaking the shrub has less numerous branches, mostly puberulent. The layman may find this species very confusing and difficult to separate from *V. scoparium*, but this is understandable as this genus is very complicated and the characters separating the species are so close that it is rather difficult to make clear-cut divisions between the species."

Hitchcock and Cronquist in *Flora of the Pacific Northwest* place *V. parviflorum*, *V. scoparium* and *V. myrtillus* together as the Group I type in their treatment of the genus.

Here is a paragraph from Michael Moore in *Medicinal Plant of the Pacific West*. "The small *Vaccinium*s (*V. myrtillus* and the delightful *V. scoparium*) are little dwarf bushes with many green, intertwined branchlets, the latter (Grouse whortleberry) sometimes covered with zillions of little light red berries, the first having sparse blue-gray berries. They both have a paucity of leaves."

I have a fond relationship with the huckleberry clan and their berries never cease to delight me. When I was a child growing up in northern Michigan, my Mother would take us huckleberry picking in wild places. After I grew up I picked huckleberries in Montana one season and picked 20 to 30 gallons of berries a day, which was real good money. Plus all the berries I could eat, plus camping in the woods and wandering around wild mountainsides with bears. I

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keep thinking I'll do it again, so I keep in touch with my berry-picking friends in Montana. The last three seasons in a row have been poor huckleberry years. It seems like there is only one good year every 3 or 4 years and it seems even worse lately with erratic weather patterns. Where we picked in northwest Montana, there were four kinds of huckleberries. Three species had big berries and we harvested them. The 4th tiny, shrubby specie had berries too small to pick commercially. It was either *V. scoparium* or *V. myrtillus*.

For years, I thought that the closest *V. myrtillus* to me was the northeast Washington/north Idaho border so I didn't look for it in the North Cascades. In doing research on huckleberry for one of my herb customers, I discovered that *V. myrtillus* supposedly grows in the North Cascades! So I called up a local botanist for advice on where to look, loaded up all my field guides, drove up into the mountains and started examining low-growing *Vaccinium*. I found that *V. scoparium* is the most prevalent species, but that there is also a lot of *V. myrtillus* in my neighborhood at elevations between 4,000 and 6,000'.

One discovery made in my first picking is that the leaves bruise very easily and bruised leaves deteriorate fast. Harvesting has to be done as delicately as possible. If it is for fresh shipment it will have to be packed delicately as well. If for drying, get them in the dryer as soon as possible after harvest.

Huckleberry "leaves" are usually harvested by clipping the ends of the twigs with their leaves attached. My clients prefer me to harvest when the bushes have ripe berries on them. Michael Moore has a great chapter on Huckleberry in his *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West* wherein he advocates harvesting leaves/twigs from patches where the leaves have the same aromatic scent as the berries.

Sustainability category D. In their respective habitats, huckleberries are often common. a light clipping of twig ends every two or three years, should be a sustainable level.

Cultivation potential: A challenge to grow. If you can grow good blueberries that is a good sign. My experience in wild Montana patches is that many of the bushes were loaded down to the ground with a great crop. Income from the berries is likely to be many times higher than that of leaf/twig production for medicinals. However, there will inevitably be the need for pruning with possible yields of leaf/twig to sell. I doubt it would be a

good financial proposition to plant huckleberry just for the leaf/twig market. They are relatively slow growing plants. The notable exception being evergreen huckleberry, *V. ovatum*. Its evergreen leaves are much heavier than those of the deciduous species. All huckleberries respond well to clipping by producing even more tip growth, which increases berry production and clipping yields.

Tools for gathering: Only harvest dry foliage. Sharp felcoe hand pruners work well, though slightly larger blades would work, considering the stem diameters are small. Tree-planting bags work well, although a larger more rigid container would protect them more from bruising. Transfer gathered material into larger, voluminous cardboard boxes or paper leaf bags for transport.

Tanaina Plantlore: Dena'ina K'et'una. an Ethnobotany of the Dena'ina Indians of Southcentral Alaska. Priscilla Russell Kari. 1987. National Park Service. 205 pp.

Here is a well-done ethnobotany by and about a people who know a lot of about the different huckleberries.

