



Native Plant Highlight: Red Chokeberry

Aronia arbutifolia

By Karan Rawlins
Photo credit Heather Brasell

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Description

This amazing native shrub, along with the entire genus *Aronia* has one of the highest antioxidant contents of any other plant genera measured. You can grow your own superfruit while helping our wildlife by planting native!

Although red chokeberry is the focus for this article, some information on *Aronia* as a genus will be included. Red chokeberry is a small, deciduous, multi-stemmed shrub which can grow from 6-12 feet tall with a spread of 3-6 feet. It forms clonal colonies from root sprouts. Its flat-topped clusters of small white flowers bloom in spring. The fruits are glossy red when ripe, looking like tiny apples. Unless eaten by wildlife or people fruits will persist on the plant through the winter. The fruits have an astringent quality when eaten raw. The leaves are light glossy green when new, turning dark glossy green as they age. The underside of the leaves is pubescent (hairy), which gives the underside a grayish green color.

Considerations for Your Garden

Red chokeberry has ornamental interest throughout the year. Beginning with clusters of white flowers in spring with bright green leaves. The glossy dark green leaves in the summer give way to a beautiful show of colors in the fall, with leaves ranging from orange to red in color. The clusters of bright shiny red berries become sweeter in the winter, brighten up the landscape, and provide late winter forage for birds and other wildlife.

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Red chokeberry can tolerate a wide range of soils, moisture, and sun conditions. Full sun will also give you the best fruits and leaf color in the fall. Red chokeberry is considered very hardy from zones 4-9. The native range reaches across eastern North America from Canada to Florida.

Chokeberry has very few pests or diseases. It does occasionally get rust, but this does not usually affect the quality of the fruit. Chokeberries naturally have a vase-like shape, but you can achieve a fuller bushier shape by pruning.

Chokeberry is often confused with chokecherry, *Prunus virginiana*, which is a native cherry. Both are in the Rose family. Red chokeberry, *Aronia*

arbutifolia is often designated as *Photinia arbutifolia*, but genetic testing places this group in its own genus, *Aronia*. Both red and black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) are native to Georgia and are available in many nurseries. If the nursery you use does not have chokeberry, ask them if they can get it for you. Be sure to ask for it by the scientific name as well as the common name to be sure you are getting the correct plant. Cultivars are available for both red and black chokeberry.

The best cultivar for red chokeberry, *Aronia arbutifolia*, according to the University of Connecticut, College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources, is 'Brilliantissima.' "It blooms

and fruits heavily, has larger fruit than the species, produces very glossy, dark green foliage and dependable, intense red fall color. It may serve as a fine native substitute for the invasive, exotic *Euonymus alata* (burning bush)."

University of Maine Extension recommends three cultivars of black chokeberry, 'Autumn Magic' has a compact growth form and has brilliant red/purple fall color. 'McKenzie' grows



from 6-12' high. 'Viking' is shorter, with a 3-6 ft. height but has vigorous growth.

Benefits

Potawatomi Native Americans used the fruits of *A. melanocarpa* to cure colds. Since early in the 20th century, cultivars of black chokeberry have been grown as a crop in Europe. Fruits are still being used in the food industry for juice, jam, and wine production. On the internet you can buy *Aronia* as dried berries, as a powder to mix into drinks, and as a supplement in capsule form.

Research has shown that *Aronia* has many health benefits and more research is ongoing. The nutritional value of about 3.5-ounces of fresh

berries is 14% of your dietary fiber, vitamins A, C, E and K, as well as folate. Minerals in a serving of fresh *Aronia* berries are calcium, potassium, iron, magnesium, manganese and zinc. Nutritional values can vary depending on where it is grown and how it is prepared. *Aronia* has been shown to have positive effects on insulin and immune response. It has been shown to reduce blood pressure, have protective effects on the liver and reduce the symptoms and damage associated with stomach disorders. *Aronia* has been shown to combat the growth of some cancers and to reduce the damage to the body from cancer. Fruits high in antioxidants have been shown to reduce inflammation and slow the aging process. None of the studies has shown any type of health problems associated with eating *Aronia* berries.

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