

Arbutus unedo – Strawberry Tree

Arbutus or cane apples is native to Ireland, southern Europe and the western Mediterranean region where it grows in rocky, well-drained soils. An evergreen broadleaf shrub or small tree it has a spreading, picturesque habit, and gray-brown bark that flakes and peels in thin plates to reveal the reddish young bark beneath. The species can get up to 9 m tall and just as wide but rarely exceed 3 to 4m in cultivation. The leathery leaves are glossy on top, oblong or oval with toothed margins, and 5 - 10cm long. Older specimens develop attractive twisted and gnarled trunks and branches. Strawberry tree begins blooming in autumn and continues into the winter. The small white or pinkish blueberry-like flowers are assembled in drooping panicles about 5cm long. The spherical bright red fruits are warty and about 2 cm in diameter. They take a year to ripen, and both flowers and fruits can be present at the same time. Strawberry tree in fruit is very showy. It is an excellent choice for a shrub border or woodland garden or as a small specimen tree. It is a useful bonsai subject.

The bark of Strawberry Tree has been used in tanning leather. The fruit is edible, but mealy and tasteless. In Portugal, strawberry tree fruits are fermented to make a strong tasting wine known as medronho. The fruits also are used to make preserves.

Strawberry tree is tolerant of acidic to alkaline soils. It does best in full sun to partial shade except in desert regions where more shade is necessary. It is drought tolerant once established and can take temperatures down to about -10°C. It is a shallow rooting species so protect from winter winds. Strawberry tree is a good choice for coastal areas since it is salt tolerant.

Strawberry tree is propagated by seeds, which germinate readily after a period of stratification. It does not do as well in climates with hot, humid summers and cold winters. Avoid using near pool and patio as heavy fruit set can make a mess.

Strawberry tree is an excellent choice for a shrub border or woodland garden, or even as a small specimen tree. Smaller cultivars are good in containers or on the patio. Strawberry tree is a good choice for coastal areas since it is salt tolerant. Prune minimally to enhance shape, but don't try to make a hedge from this shrub. Strawberry Tree does best in Mediterranean climates, with cool, wet winters and mild, dry summers. It does not do as well in continental climates with hot, humid summers and cold winters. Avoid using near pool and patio as heavy fruit set can make a mess on a walkway or patio.

Propagation

WHEN TO SOW - In warm areas, or in a glass house - at any time in frost prone areas sow when the danger of frost has passed.

WHERE TO GROW – Full sun or part shade in any well-drained soil.

SOWING – Soak seed overnight then drain and sow. Fill a pot or tray with a good quality potting mix, wet thoroughly and compress. Sow seeds thinly on the surface and cover with a thin layer of soil. Keep the soil moist but not damp. Cover with clear polythene until germination in about 2-5 weeks.

CULTIVATION - Thin the seedlings out if crowded, transplant or pot at 5cm. Disturb the roots as little as possible. Water in well and water regularly until established, thereafter as needed. Protect against snails and slugs during germination and seedling stage.

