

OFF THE BEATEN PATH: Hidden Treasures of the Arboretum The Pink-Flowered Strawberry Tree

BY DANIEL MOUNT

The strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) is well represented in the Arboretum. The colony that frames the patio on the south end of the Graham Visitors Center draws attention each fall and early winter with its dense clusters of small, urn-shaped white flowers and spectacular scarlet fruits. It would be hard to miss this show if you parked at the Visitors Center. Yet deeper in the Arboretum, there is another grouping of strawberry trees that most visitors miss.

Three pink-flowered strawberry trees (*Arbutus unedo* f. *rubra*) can be found in the Mediterranean Collection, directly south of the Sorbus Collection, just off Arboretum Drive. During most of the year, these trees vanish into the evergreen tapestry of the park and are likely only seen by those with a keen eye for variations in the color green. Their leathery, evergreen foliage is dark and shines above a swatch of

velvet-leaved, white rock rose (*Cistus* × *corbariensis*) to the south and the felted-silver carpet of daisy bush (*Brachyglottis* ‘Sunshine’) to the north.

What is unique about these trees is not only the color of their flowers but also their provenance. Strawberry tree is primarily a Mediterranean species, found throughout that sea’s basin as an integral part of the low, scrubby woodlands known as *macchia* in Italy and *maquis* in France. But before the last Ice Age, *Arbutus unedo* was widespread throughout a much warmer Western Europe. Today, there are still isolated relict populations in both southwestern and northwestern Ireland, most notably around Killarney, in County Kerry, and Lough Gill, in County Sligo—which is home to the northernmost native population of the strawberry tree. *Arbutus unedo* f. *rubra* was found in 1835 near the village of Glengarriff in the southwestern county of Cork.





ABOVE: The pink flower clusters of *Arbutus unedo* f. *rubra*. (Photo by Daniel Mount)

OPPOSITE: The developing fruits of the pink-flowered strawberry tree. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

Coming from this northerly gene pool, the pink-flowered form is considerably hardier than others. Add the fact that this form also has a lovely dwarf habit—the largest of the Arboretum’s 54-year-old trees are just about 20 feet tall—and it’s surprising that the plant is not commercially available this side of the Atlantic. (The Pat Calvert Greenhouse is propagating cuttings of the pink-flowered strawberry tree and should have a limited supply of them ready for sale by late spring 2015.)

The strawberry tree has been brought into gardens since classical times, not only for its beauty but also for medicinal purposes. The edible but astringent fruits were used to treat urinary and digestive problems. Despite their insipid texture and taste, they were also used for making marmalade. (Pliny was so famously unimpressed with the taste of the fruit, he named the plant “unedo,” meaning “I eat one” in Latin. Linnaeus preserved this moniker when he gave the plant its scientific name in 1753.) It

The Butterfly and the Strawberry Tree

The strawberry tree is host to the one of the most spectacular butterflies in the European fauna, the Two-tailed Pasha (*Charaxes jastus*). It is the primary food source of the larvae of this butterfly. Adults, though they feed on many flowers and even rotten fruit, can often be found fluttering about strawberry trees during their spring and fall breeding seasons. Very territorial adults will defend a chosen tree, even from humans.



wasn't introduced into England until the 16th century, and those first plants were brought over from Ireland. The Elizabethans called it "Irish arbutus." The first mention of strawberry trees on this side of the Atlantic is found in the 1778 garden lists of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello.

The Arboretum received and planted its first grouping of strawberry trees back in 1937. The pink-flowered form arrived in 1960 as rooted cuttings from George Jackman and Sons Nursery, in Great Britain. (The Jackman

Nursery is actually more famous for its clematis hybrids—in particular the classic *C. × jackmannii*—than for trees and shrubs.) These Irish arbutus were planted—a bit errantly it seems—in the Mediterranean Collection that same year. ☺

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