BILBERRY

*Vaccinium myrtillus*  
[vak-SIN-ee-um mir-TIL-us]

**Family:** Ericaceae

**Names:** whortleberry; blaeberry; huckleberries; hurtleberries; Myrtille ou airelle (French); Borowka Czarna, Czarna Jagoda (Polish); Heidelbeere, Blaubeere (German)

**Description:** Ornamental, deciduous shrub that turns yellow-green, then red in the fall. Its height is 1-2 feet with a width of 3-4 feet. The flowers are pale, green-pink, ¼ inch and solitary. The leaves are shiny, leathery, bright green, finely dented around the edges, oval, 1 inch long. The fruit resembles currants, slightly acid, globe-shaped, 1/3 inch in diameter and purple. The root is thin and creeping. Blooms from May to August.

**Cultivation:** It’s a perennial to zone 5. Space 2 feet apart. Soil temperature best at 65-75F for propagation. The soil should be damp, peaty with humus and moist. Plenty of water but not standing. pH is best at 4-5. Filtered shade preferred. Propagate from rooted cuttings. An aid to harvesting bilberries in many parts of France is a sort of shovel-like ‘comb’. However in many areas they are forbidden because they damage the stalks and sometimes the whole bush.

**History:** The genus contains about 150 species with the common names interchanged so often that no one is sure which berries were referred to by the Roman Pliny. It was known that bilberry was a medicinal herb in the 16th century. The American name bilberry came from the Danish *bollebar* or “dark berry.” In the US, they are also called huckleberries. *Myrtillus* is from the Latin *myrtus*, ‘myrtle’, referring to the rich, deep myrtle-like greenness assumed by the leaves in autumn.

**Constituents:** The fruit has anthocyanin, responsible for the blue color, alkaloids (myrtine, epimyrtine), glycosides (quercitrin), tannins (to 7%), organic acids, pectin, sugar, vitamins A and C. Leaves contain glucoquinine.
**Properties:** astringent, lowers blood sugar levels, blood and yin tonic, antiseptic, prevent vomiting, urinary antiseptic

**Energetics:** Fruit: sour, astringent, cold, drying
Leaves: astringent, bitter, cool

**Meridians/Organs affected:** Fruit: liver, kidneys
Leaves: spleen, bladder, colon

**Medicinal Uses:** A drink of the fruit and roots steeped in gin is an old remedy to stop diarrhea and relieve nausea and indigestion though large amounts of the whole berries eaten with their seeds and skin provide a laxative bulk. Normally the dried fruit is markedly binding and has an antibacterial action. They can decrease intestinal inflammation and help protect the digestive tract lining. The berries are also said to be a refrigerant that lowers body heat. Studies show an effect on heart contractions and blood vessels that is thought to be caused by the berries stimulating the production of prostaglandins. There is evidence that they also help prevent blood clots. Bilberry’s high anthocyanin content makes it a potentially valuable treatment for varicose veins, hemorrhoids, and capillary fragility. Bilberries are incorporated into European pharmaceuticals that are used to improve circulation. Several scientific studies support this use. In Russia, berries and leaves are used to treat colitis, stomach problems and sugar diabetes. The leaves are also found in folk remedies of other countries to treat diabetes. The glucoquinine in the leaves does show a weak ability to lower blood sugar. Clinical studies have been proposed to back the hypoglycemic effects found in animals. German researchers have also suggested that the quinic acid produced from a tea of dried bilberry leaves is a potential treatment for rheumatism and gout. A decoction of the fruit is used as a mouthwash.

Modern research shows that the fruit contains compounds known as anthocyanosides which contribute to visual acuity. Italian researchers show that a mixture of anthocyanosides from bilberry plus vitamin E halted the progression of lens clouding in 97% of people with early-stage cataracts. Regular use of the fruit results in quicker adjustment to darkness and glare and improved visual acuity both at night and in bright light during the day. It may be useful in the prevention and treatment of glaucoma since it strengthens connective tissue and prevents free radical damage. Recommendation is a standardized bilberry extract (with 25% anthocyanidin) at a dose of 80-160 milligrams 3 times a day.

**Solvent:** dilute alcohol and boiling water

**APPLICATIONS:**
**Fruit:** Fresh: eat a large bowl of the whole fresh berries (with sugar and milk or cream, if preferred) for constipation
**Juice:** The unsweetened juice is most effective for diarrhea: take in 10 ml doses
**Decoction:** take one glass daily for chronic diarrhea
**Mouthwash:** use the diluted juice for ulcers and gum inflammations
**Lotion:** dilute the juice with an equal amount of witch hazel to make a cooling lotion for sunburn and skin inflammations
**Powder:** for babies and infants with diarrhea: mix 75 mg per 1 lb body weight into the baby’s bottle
**Leaves:**
**Infusion:** take as an adjunct to dietary controls in late-onset, non-insulin-dependent diabetes

**Remedies:**
**Macular Tea**
1 tsp bilberry
1 tsp pasque flower
1 tsp black currants
1 tsp raspberry leaves
2 cups boiling water

Combine the above herbs and cover with the boiling water; steep for 20-30 minutes; strain and drink, as needed, up to two cups per day.

**Toxicity:** Do not use the leaves for longer than 3 weeks at a time. The leaves lower blood
sugar levels, so insulin-dependent diabetics should not take them in infusion without professional guidance.

**Ritual Uses:** Herb of Jupiter and Pluto; The bilberry is deeply linked to the Celtic Harvest Festival or Lammas (Lughnasadh). The King of Tara’s diet had to include fish from the Boyne, venison from Luibnech, bilberries from Bri Leith near Ardagh, and other obligatory items. Bilberries may be incorporated into the Lammas Feast or used as part of the temple decoration.

**Other Uses:** The berries produce a blue-purple dye with alum and other colors.

**Culinary Uses:** Bilberries have been stewed with lemon and sugar. Eat the berries with thick or clotted cream or milk, make them into tarts, pancakes or pies and, if you can find enough, try them as a wine. It is said to have been added to whisky in the past as well as liqueurs and wines to make them seem richer and more ages. The small size of the seeds makes them ideal for jams, syrups and conserves.

**Recipes:**

**Pickled Bilberries**
Bilberries
White wine vinegar
Sugar
Cayenne pepper

Pick over the bilberries, which should not be too ripe. Put them into clean, dry jars. To each 1 pint vinegar add 8 oz sugar and a little cayenne pepper. Boil the mixture, skim well and simmer for a few minutes. Cool and when cold, pour over the bilberries and seal the jars in the usual way.

**Dried Bilberries**
Spread the berries in a tray, lightly covered with greaseproof paper, in a warm airing cupboard for a week or more until dry, or for a shorter time in a very cool oven. Store in jars and use as currants.

**Bilberry Warmer**
To each 1 lb berries, add 2 oz sugar and ¼ pint water. Simmer until soft, then strain off the juice. Add a little cinnamon to taste and drink hot.

**Bilberry Wine**
Activated yeast
3 lb bilberries
9 quarts water
6 cups sugar
2 lemons
2-3 Tbsp cold tea or 1 tsp grape tannin

Wash the bilberries and remove any stalks. Put the berries in the plastic bucket and crush them with a wooden spoon, pour on the boiling water, then add the sugar and the thinly pared rind (no pith) and strained juice of the lemons, stir until the sugar has dissolved, cover the bucket with a clean cloth and allow to stand until cool, (about 70F). Stir in the cold tea, or grape tannin, and the activated yeast, cover the bucket with its lid and stand in a warm place for four days. Strain the liquid into the fermentation jar (dark glass for red wine), fit the bung and fermentation lock, and allow the wine to ferment in a reasonably warm place until a sediment has settled at the bottom of the jar and the bubbles in the fermentation lock have ceased. This takes several weeks, after which the wine should begin to clear, maybe only a clear layer at the top of the jar, but the wine is now ready to be siphoned off through a length of plastic tubing into a second fermentation jar, which you have previously sterilized. Don’t let any sediment from the bottom of the jar get into the siphon tube and, to make up for the small amount of wine left behind with the sediment, top up the new jar with a little cooled, boiled water. This process is called ‘racking’ the wine, and it can now be left in a cool place for about three months, or until it has cleared completely. It is then siphoned into sterilized bottles and corked with new sterilized corks. If the wine has not completely cleared, you should rack it again into a sterilized fermentation jar, top up again, if necessary, with cool, boiled water, fit the
bung and fermentation lock again and leave it for a few more weeks.

**Billberry Crumble**
1 lb bilberries
1 medium cooking apple, peeled and thinly sliced
1 Tbsp granulated sugar
3 oz plain flour
½ tsp ground cinnamon
2 oz margarine or lard or a mixture
3 oz brown sugar

Put the bilberries, apples and sugar, mixed together into a baking dish. Mix together the flour and cinnamon and rub in the fat with the finger tips until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs. Add the sugar. Spread over the fruit mixture. Bake at 375F for 45-50 minutes or until the topping is browned. Serve hot with cream or custard. (Food from the Countryside)

**Bilberry Tart with Nut Pastry**
¾ cup + 2 Tbsp flour
1 pinch salt
3 Tbsp ground almonds or hazelnuts
2 Tbsp sugar
4 Tbsp butter
2-3 tbsp iced water
1 lb 2 oz bilberries
confectioners’ sugar to taste

Make the nut pastry: mix together the flour, salt, nuts and sugar and rub in the butter until the mixture resembles fine crumbs. Make a well in the middle and add enough water to make the pastry come together. Wrap in foil and chill. Roll the pastry out to fit a 10 ½ inch quiche tin with removable base and crimp the edges decoratively. Chill the pastry case.

About 1 hour before serving, arrange the bilberries in the pastry case. Heat the oven to 425F. Bake the tart for 25-30 minutes or until the juices begin to run and the pastry is lightly colored. Remove from the oven, sprinkle with icing sugar and cool on a rack. (Fruit of the Forest)

**Cheat’s Bilberry Jam**
1 lb 2 oz bilberries
1 ½ cups quick-setting jam sugar with added citric acid and pectin
juice 1 lemon

Put the bilberries in a pan, bring to the boil and cook until the juice starts to run. Add the sugar and stir until dissolved, then boil for 4-5 minutes. Remove from the heat, stir in the lemon juice and leave to cool for 5 minutes before potting into small jars. Keep refrigerated. (Fruit of the Forest)

**Bilberry Pudding**
1 lb bilberries
6 oz sugar
1 small stale loaf of bread

Gently simmer the bilberries with the sugar until soft. Cut the bread into thick slices, remove the crusts and line the sides and bottom of a deep pudding basin with the bread, so that the slices overlap and there are no gaps. Keep a layer of bread aside for the top of the pudding. Place the bilberries and juice in the basin and cover the top with the remaining slice of bread. Place a saucer on the top with a heavy weight and leave in a fridge overnight. Serve chilled with cream or egg custard. (Nature’s Wild Harvest)

**Bilberry Pie**
1 lb bilberries
6 oz sugar
1 tsp lemon juice
6 oz shortcrust pastry

Roll out the pastry so that it is overlapping the top of the pie dish. Cut off the surplus and press it on the damp rim of the dish. Place the bilberries and sugar on the dish and sprinkle with lemon juice. Place a pie support in the center and lay the pastry over it. Press the edges of the pastry together and place the pie on a baking tray in the center of a hot oven (425F) for 15 minutes and then reduce to moderate heat (350F) for a further 15 minutes. (Nature’s Wild Harvest)

**Bilberry Soup**
1 lb bilberries
¾ oz cornflour
4 oz sugar
grated rind of ½ lemon
1 pint water

Place the bilberries and lemon rind in the water and simmer until tender. Stir in the sugar and then remove from the heat. Blend the cornflour with a little water to form a smooth paste. Gradually stir into the soup, then bring to the boil, stirring continuously until the soup thickens (Nature’s Wild Harvest)

References:

Sources:
Crimson Sage, http://www.crimson-sage.com
Plants