**WINTERGREEN**

*Gaultheria procumbens*
[gol-THAIR-ee-uh pro-KUM-benz]

**Family:** Ericaceae

**Names:** aromatic wintergreen, berried tea, boxberry, Canadian tea, Checkerberry, checkerberry wintergreen, chequerberry, checkerberry, clink, creeping wintergreen deerberry, dewberry, ground holly, ground ivy, grouse berry, hillberry, ivory plum, mountain merry, mountain tea, mountain teaberry, partridge berry, pigeonberry, red-berry tea, red pollom, roxberry, spice berry, spicy wintergreen, spring wintergreen, Teaberry, threee-leaved wintergreen, trailing gaultheria, wax cluster, wintergberry, woodsman's tea; Gaultheria (Oil); Waldmeister (German); asperule odorante (French); stellina odorosa (Italian)

**Description:** small, stiff, creeping herb. Height 6 inches, width: 6 inches. Flowers are small, solitary, nodding, white 1/4 inch long. Leaves are elongated ovals up to 2 inches long with dark green, shiny tops. Fruit is scarlet, round berries, about 1/3 inches in diameter. Blooms from June to August

**Cultivation:** A perennial to zone 3-4. Germination is 3-4 weeks but can last up to a year. Stratify at 40F for 1-2 months. Space 6-8 inches. Collect seed in the fall and sow seeds thickly on a mixture of sand and fine-milled peat moss, then cover with a thin layer of peat moss. It is wise to protect the flats in winter with hardware cloth or screen to prevent rodents from eating the seeds. Remove the screen in the spring and provide light shading. Transplant to permanent locations in the fall or the following spring. Soil is best sandy and moist but will tolerate dry. The soil needs to be acidic (pH 4-6.5) with abundant organic matter. Partial or full shade but it grows and flowers best in sunny openings with light shade during midday. Propagation is also by cuttings, root division, or layering stolons, which grow just below surface. Make cuttings of the stems and runners in early summer before they become woody, and plant in a flat with a moist mixture of sand and peat moss. Transplant the following spring to an appropriate location. The leaves are harvested during the summer, from June to September.

**History:** Wintergreen, also known as teaberry, is native to North America. Its leaves contain methyl salicylate (wintergreen oil), an oily liquid that smells and tastes like wintergreen. Swallowing even small amounts of wintergreen oil may cause severe poisoning: nausea, vomiting, acidosis, pulmonary edema, pneumonia, convulsions and death. Most modern "wintergreen oil" is a synthetic methyl salicylate. The Algonquins took the tea as a depurative and for colds and headache. Cherokee took the root tea for chronic dyspepsia and colds and chewed the plant for tender gums. Delaware, Iroquois, Menominee, Ojibwa, Potawatomi used the leaves, usually boiled in tea, for rheumatism. Samuel Thomson, founder of the 19th century Physiomedicalist movement, combined it with hemlock to treat severe fluid retention.
Wintergreen leaves have been used as a substitute for tea during the Revolutionary War.

**Constituents:** phenolic compounds: gaultherin, salicylic acid, o-pyrocatechuc, gentisic, vanillic, caffeic and other acids; Essential oil: methyl salicylate is produced through the action of enzymes of the glycoside gaultherin when the leaf is broken or fermented, then distilled. Also phenols (gaultherin and salicylic acid); mucilage, resin and tannins.

**Actions:** analgesic, anti-inflammatory, antiarthritic, antitussive, astringent, carminative, diuretic, emmenagogue, galactagogue, stimulant

**Energetics:** spicy, warm

**Meridians/Organs affected:** liver, lungs

**Medicinal Uses:** Wintergreen is strongly anti-inflammatory, antiseptic and soothing to the digestive system. It is an effective remedy for rheumatic and arthritic problems and, taken as a tea, it relieves flatulence and colic. It reestablishes fundamental flow patterns. It heals chronic mucus discharge. It is diuretic and astringent but increases menses and lactation. The essential oil, in the form of a liniment or ointment, brings relief to inflamed, swollen, or sore muscles, ligaments, and joints, and can also prove valuable in treating neurological conditions such as sciatica and trigeminal neuralgia. The oil is sometimes used to treat cellulitis, a bacterial infection causing skin to become inflamed. The Inuit of Labrador and other native peoples eat the berries raw, and use the leaves to treat headaches, aching muscles and sore throat.

The methyl salicylate found in wintergreen leaves is closely related to salicylic acid. Accordingly, the leaf tea is given for the same conditions treated by aspirin, such as colds, flu, fever, muscle pain, arthritis and rheumatism. It has also been used to treat asthma and skin problems. In contrast to aspirin, small amounts relieve stomach indigestion instead of causing it. Native Americans chewed wintergreen leaves to improve their breathing while carrying loads or running and on long treks. In some regions, Early American settlers had their children chew the roots for 6 weeks every spring to reduce tooth decay. They also steeped the berries in brandy for a winter tonic. It is a skin softener that will smooth rough, callused skin. In liniments, it eases muscular, arthritic and rheumatic pains and is readily absorbed into skin. It’s a popular flavoring for toothpaste and other dental preparations.

**PREPARATION:**
Use 1 cup of infusion a day in mouthful doses, or 5-15 drops of tincture 1-2 times a day.

**Culinary Uses:** Wintergreen was a popular tea herb called tea berry and mountain tea. The berries are eaten raw and also made into pies. The leaves are an important flavoring in root beer, traditionally made in the spring or fall from freshly harvested roots.

**Aromatherapy:** Wintergreen oil was once true wintergreen, but it is difficult to produce and now comes from birch bark or synthetic methyl salicylate. Wintergreen oil was originally used by bookbinders to keep leather soft. Iceland Wintergreen was a handkerchief perfume used by 19th century women. Use to dissolve hardened skin on the feet and to relieve pain, also for corns.

**Extraction:** Steam distillation

**Characteristics:** a pale yellow or pinkish liquid with an intense sweet-woody, almost fruity odor.

**Energy:** cooling/moisturizing; Taste: pungent

**Dosha effect:** P K-, V o

**Blends with:** oregano, mints, thyme, ylang ylang, narcissus and vanilla

**Recipes:**

**Iceland Wintergreen**
1/2 tsp each of rose oil, lavender oil, neroli oil, vanilla oil, cassia oil; 1 drop wintergreen oil. Blend ingredients
**Ritual Uses:** Traditionally associated with protection and hex-breaking. Herb of the Moon and Water.

**Culinary Uses:** Wintergreen berries taste great and go well in salads and fruit dishes. They're best combined with other fruits, since they need juiciness and sweetness for balance. Cooking them destroys their flavor. Blend in a fruit shake along with pears, bananas and water. The berries are so high in vitamin C they were used to treat scurvy. Drying the leaves or berries is pointless as the oil volatizes and leaves bland, leathery dried fruit and leaves. The tea is perfect if you feel run down or chilled in winter. Chewing wintergreen leaves or eating the berries refreshes the breath and soothes irritated gum and canker sores. The berries can be frozen and are delicious added to pancakes and muffins.

**Recipes:**

**Root Beer**
1 1/2 gallons molasses  
5 gallons water  
4 oz wintergreen leaf  
8 oz sassafras root bark  
1/2 cup dry yeast  
Heat molasses and water to 160°F and let stand 2 hours. Add herbs and yeast and let ferment 12 hours at room temperature and bottle (or refrigerate)

**Wintergreen Tea**
Fill a jar with freshly picked leaves, then fill the jar with boiling water. Let sit in a warm spot for 3 days before straining. It needs some fermentation time to release the flavor. It's slightly stimulating and has a warming and restorative feel. Use for headaches, the aches and pains of colds and gripe and especially for rheumatic pains in joints and muscles.

**Wintergreen Leaf Wine**
2 qts young (red) wintergreen leaves  
½ lb golden raisins, chopped or minced  
2 large oranges, zest and juice  
2¼-3 lbs finely granulated sugar  
1/8 tsp tannin  
1 gal water  
1 tsp yeast nutrient  
1 pkt Champagne wine yeast  
Put half the water on to boil. Meanwhile, wash and trim stems from leaves and put in primary. Pour the boiling water over leaves, cover primary, and let set overnight. Strain off the liquid and save it. Boil the other half of the water and pour over the strained leaves, chopped or minced raisins and zest of two large oranges. Cover primary and set aside for one hour. To this, add water drained off earlier. Add juice from oranges and all remaining ingredients except yeast. Stir until sugar is completely dissolved. Add activated yeast and cover. Stir daily for one week. Strain through nylon straining bag into secondary and fit airlock. Ferment to dryness, rack, top up and refit airlock. Set aside two months and if clear rack carefully into bottles. If not clear, top up, refit airlock and set aside until clear. Rack into bottles. Age 3-6 months.

**Teaberry Wine**
4-6 lbs ripe teaberries  
1¾-2 lbs granulated sugar  
6½ pts water  
½ tsp acid blend  
1 tsp pectic enzyme  
1 crushed Campden tablet  
1 tsp yeast nutrient  
1 pkg wine yeast  
Put half the water on to boil and stir in sugar until dissolved. Meanwhile, wash berries and cull out any that are not ripe or are unsound. Put berries in nylon straining bag and tie closed. Place in primary and mash berries. Pour sugar-water over berries and add remaining water to help cooling. Cover with cloth and set aside until cooled to room temperature. Stir in acid blend, yeast nutrient and crushed Campden. Recover and wait 12 hours. Stir in pectic enzyme, recover and set aside another 12 hours. Add activated yeast and recover primary. Stir twice daily until fermentation dies down. Remove straining bag, squeeze to extract maximum juice, and discard pulp. Allow to settle overnight and rack into secondary. Top up if required and fit airlock. Rack, top up and refit airlock after 60 days and again when wine clears. Set wine in cool, dark place for 4 months, checking airlock periodically. Stabilize, sweeten to taste (if desired) and set
aside for 14 days. Rack into bottles, age 3-6 months and enjoy.

**Wintergreen Jelly**
1 pint of fresh picked wintergreen leaves
1 pint of ripe wintergreen berries
1 quart of water
1 cup of sugar per cup of juice
3 oz liquid pectin

Wash and discard any bad leaves, bruise all leaves, place into a saucepan with 1 pint of cold water. Bring to a boil and simmer for 15 minutes. This will free much of the oil of wintergreen from the bruised leaves. In a separate saucepan, combine 1 pint of ripe berries and 1 pint of cold tap water. Bring to a boil. Simmer until berries soften, then crush with a potato masher. Drain the hot juicy pulp through a jelly bag. Strain the leaf infusion, combine with the berry juice and 1 cup of sugar to each cup of juice in a saucepan. Bring to a boil, add 3 oz of liquid pectin and hold at a boil for 1 full minute. Remove, skim the surface, pour into hot sterile jelly jars and seal (Wild Preserves)

**Wintergreen Jam**
In the jar of a blender put 2 cups of bright, fresh wintergreen berries, the juice of 1 lemon and 1 cup of strong Wintergreen Tea. This was blended until smooth and evenly pink-colored, then poured into a mixing bowl and mix with 4 cups of sugar. In a small saucepan, combine 1 package commercial pectin and 3/4 cup of water, bring to a boil, boil hard for 1 minute, then stir it thoroughly in the berry mixture. When evenly blended, ladle quickly into small sterilized jars, seal and store in the refrigerator.

**References:**


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