

Bunchberry

Cornus canadensis

By Barbara Nuffer

Frank Knight

Bunchberry, *Cornus canadensis*, is a native plant that grows in the cool forests of the mountains of New York State. It is a close relative of the flowering dogwood tree (a popular home landscaping plant), because it has the same foliage and flowers. However, bunchberry only grows to six inches tall.

The attractive white flowers of the bunchberry appear in May and June, surrounded by the shiny, green leaves of the plant. Each “flower” is actually made up of four white petal-like bracts, with a center of many true flowers. The flowers of the bunchberry are self-sterile and depend on pollinating insects for fertilization. When an insect lands on the central portion of the flower, pollen is propelled explosively onto the insect’s body.

Each “true” flower produces a berry-like drupe, resulting in a cluster of attractive, bright red fruit. A drupe is a type of fruit that produces one hard seed, which is enclosed in a stony pit, such as an olive. The name bunchberry derives from the plant’s “bunches” of red fruit.

Other common names for bunchberry are ground dogwood and dwarf dogwood, because of the plant’s short stature. To thrive, it requires the shade of conifer trees and cool, acidic soil. The acidity comes from fallen conifer needles that decompose in the soil surrounding the plants. Their location in the mountains provides the cool, below 65-degree soil condition they require.

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Many wildlife species enjoy the edible fruits of the bunchberry, as other names for the plant, including

bearberry and squirrelberry, confirm. Bears return year after year to munch on colonies of bunchberries in the fall. But the main agent of dispersal of the seeds is migrating fall birds, who drop them after eating the fleshy fruits.

Each seed takes two to three years to germinate, but the plant can also spread by rhizomes, which are horizontal stems growing underground.

Bunchberry was used by Native Americans as a cold and colic remedy. In New England the plant was known as pudding berry because the fruits were used to thicken plum puddings.

On a snowless day in early winter, take a hike on a trail in the Adirondack or Catskill mountains and gaze at the bronze-colored foliage and bunches of red fruits of the ground-hugging bunchberry. Be sure to return again in the spring to enjoy the plant’s bright-white flowers.

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