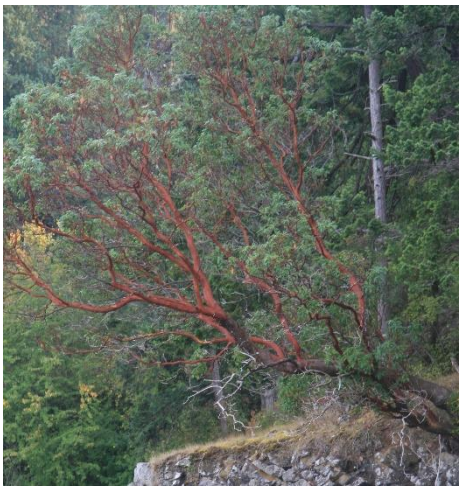
Pacific Madrone

March 2018

Arbutus menziesii

Field Notes



Cinnamon red bark of a madrone. Creative Commons, nwplants.com/jko

General Description

Twisting skyward, the smooth, reddish-brown branches of a Pacific madrone tree are striking. Esteemed botanist, Willis Linn Jepson, described it as "a tree than which none other in the western woods is more marked by sylvan beauty."

Arbutus menziesii, also called *madroño*, or the strawberry tree (for its berries), is an evergreen member of the heath family (Ericaceae), closely related to blueberries, mountain laurels, rhododendrons, and manzanita. Madrone trees can reach up to 40 m (130 ft), though more typically they are half that height. Its upper red-brown bark peels each summer in thin strips to reveal smooth, greenish-yellow bark that ripens into a deep, dark red color. White, fragrant, urn-shaped flowers (8 mm; 1/3 in) dangle in clusters at the ends of branches. Scarlet red, bumpy berries (8–12 mm) ripen in the fall and may last into early winter. Alternate, oval leaves (10–15 cm; 4–6 in long) are leathery and glossy dark green above and lighter grayish below. New leaves replace the old ones every two years before the old ones fall off.

Ecology

The Pacific madrone thrives in full sunlight and depends on periodic fire to create forest openings.

Birds, like robins, cedar waxwings, bandtailed pigeons, and quail eat its berries. Other berry-eaters include mule deer, raccoons, and bears. Woodpeckers and other cavity nesting birds, like mountain chickadees, house wrens, and western bluebirds nest in madrones.



Pacific madrone flowers and leaves. Creative Commons, nwplants.com/jen. Inset: madrone berries. NPS/John Roth

Reproduction

The Pacific madrone reproduces vegetatively more than by seed. After a disturbance, like fire, burls at the base of the tree produce root crown sprouts, forming a multi-trunked tree. Bees and possibly hummingbirds pollinate its flowers.

Habitat and Distribution

Madrones occur natively in the Pacific Northwest from the coast ranges of southern California north into British Columbia. Some populations grow at middle elevations in the Sierra Nevada. They are relicts of the drought-resistant Madro-Tertiary geoflora that once occupied the Pacific Northwest millions of years ago. Madrones are common in coastal mixed forest. They flourish in dry, well-drained soils with gaps in the canopy for access to sunlight.

Ethnobotany

Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest had multiple uses for this tree. Though not sweet, its berries made cider. They were also strung for necklaces and used as bait for steelhead fishing. Its bark made a medicinal tea to wash sores and treat colds and sore throats. Chewing its leaves treated cramps and stomachaches.



Madrone bark, showing a patch of older, rough bark, and the papery, recently shed younger bark on the edges of new, smooth bark. Photo courtesy Sonya Daw

Conservation

Fire suppression is a conservation concern for madrones because it has allowed shade tolerant species to overgrow and compete with madrone.

Where to See

Look for madrones in Crater Lake NP, Oregon Caves NMP, Redwood NSP, and Whiskeytown NRA.

More Information

https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/pacific_madrone/#.Wqmysejwa70

https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/cs_arme.pdf