

BUFFALOBERRY

Shepherdia canadensis (L.) Nutt.

plant symbol = SHCA

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Plant Systematics Teaching Collection
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Alternative Names

soapberry, buffalo-berry, russet buffaloberry, russet red buffaloberry, Canadian buffalo-berry

Uses

Ethnobotanic: Buffaloberry berries were used to make "Indian ice cream" which has a bitter taste but was often sweetened with salal berries, camas bulbs, or hemlock cambium (Pojar & MacKinnon 1994). The berries were also eaten fresh or dried.

The Wet'suwet'en used the twigs, leaves, berries, and juice medicinally for everything from heart attacks to indigestion. The berries were also chewed by Wet'suwet'en women to induce childbirth. The Salish and Kootenai tribes boiled debarked branches and used the solution as eyewash. A poultice of the inner bark, softened by hot water and mixed with pin cherry bark (*Prunus pensylvanica*) has been used to make a plaster or bandage for wrapping broken limbs (Moerman 1998).

Landscaping & Wildlife: *Shepherdia canadensis* plants are grown occasionally for ornamental use. The berries are browsed by grouse, black bears, grizzly bears, and snowshoe hares.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's

current status, such as, state noxious status and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Oleaster Family (Elaeagnaceae). Buffaloberry is a native, deciduous, nitrogen-fixing shrub that ranges in height from three to thirteen feet. The leaves are opposite, oval, two to six centimeters long, dark greenish on upper surface with whitish silvery hairs and rusty brown spots on the undersurface (Pojar & MacKinnon 1994). The flowers are small, yellowish or brownish, male and female flowers on separate shrubs. The fruits are drupelike, red or yellowish, ovoid achenes, that are fleshy and edible but almost tasteless or bitter (Viereck & Little 1972).

Distribution: Buffaloberry is found from Newfoundland to Alaska, south to Maine, to western New York, Ohio, and northern Mexico. For current distribution, please consult the PLANTS profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Adaptation

Shepherdia canadensis occurs in dry to moist open woods and thickets, from lowlands to middle elevation forests (Pojar & MacKinnon 1994). It prefers moist to wet soil and is generally found on rocky, sandy, or gravelly soils and is able to survive on nutrient poor soils because of its nitrogen fixing ability. This species prefers partial shade or partial sun to full sun.

Establishment

Propagation by Seed: Buffaloberry seeds should be harvested in the autumn and sown immediately in a cold frame. The seeds must not be allowed to dry out. Seeds have a hard seed coat and scarification with sulfuric acid for twenty to thirty minutes followed by two to three months of cold stratification will help the embryo to develop (Dirr & Heuser 1987). Place the seedlings into individual pots when they are large enough to handle. If sufficient growth is made by the summer, it is possible to plant them out, otherwise grow them in a cold frame for the first winter and out plant the following spring or early summer.

Management

Shepherdia canadensis fruit contain low concentrations of a bitter principle, saponin, which foams in water. It is very poorly absorbed by the body and can be broken down by thoroughly cooking the fruit. Saponin is much more toxic to some creatures, such as fish, if eaten in large quantities.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

Somewhat available from native plant nurseries within its range.

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