

# Tales from the Mulberry Cave

by Al Chomica

As a gardener who grows over a dozen different varieties of berries, the Mulberry easily became my favourite the first time I popped one into my mouth. In my humble opinion, they are the sweetest berry in the history of the universe. The variety I am talking about is called the Illinois Everbearing Mulberry, which is a natural hybrid cross between a Red Mulberry and a White Mulberry. Our six-year old trees are prolific and produce hundreds of these juicy berries from July until mid-October. Aside from the fact they are so sweet and tasty, we have discovered these trees also have some very interesting attributes that I wish to share. One particular attribute that appeals to me is that the flowers are self-fertile and pollinated by wind so they do not require bees to set fruit.



We obtained two small trees six years ago from a nursery in Tsawwassen. The specimens were in poor shape so the owner gave us two for the price of one and we are so glad he did. We planted the little sticks in two locations and waited a couple years before they set their first fruits. They were very slow growing at first and we found out they do very well with a good drink every now and then.

The berries themselves are extremely juicy with each drupe just waiting to burst open. They are so delicate that once picked they must be eaten because they do not store or transport well at all. The juice appears to permanently stain clothing.

The berries are unique in that they are not sweet at all until they get 100% ripe. I jokingly call them the Illinois Never-Bearing Mulberry because I can see the berries ripening for weeks but they seem to stall and take forever. One of the telltale signs of a berry ripening is the stem. While the stem is green, the berry is not sweet. In the image above, one can see the stem on this berry has turned brown, which would indicate this berry is ripe and



sweet and ready to fall. It is easy to pick a cup of berries a day from our trees. And we usually cheat by draping a drop cloth under the branches so the berries can be caught before they fall to the ground.

One of our trees was planted in a brilliant location against a cedar hedge. This location was perfect to prune an opening to allow access to the backside of the tree where one can easily pick the berries that remain hidden from the outside. This tree has become locally known as the Mulberry Cave. During the summer we have held "Cave Tours" into this tree so we could share the exquisite taste of these wonderful berries. The picture on the previous page shows some of our Garden Club members enjoying a Cave Tour. It is hard to believe how much fun one can generate from a simple tree.

One nursery on Denman Island sells Mulberry plants. The grower mentioned he obtains and roots cuttings from a White Mulberry first and when it is three years old he can then graft an Illinois Mulberry onto it. I decided to try a radically different approach and can boast a 98% success rate with rooting Mulberry cuttings. This year I was selling five-week old plants that were 10 inches long with extremely vigorous growth.

Last year the livestock and equestrian people discovered these plants and started to buy them by the dozen. When discussing the properties of the plant I was told they are not toxic so they are good to plant around horses. Secondly, they have giant leaves and grow about 12 feet a year so they quickly create a shady border around a corral. And the berries drop to the ground when ripe so goats and chickens can benefit from the bounty as well. There is a massive 50-year-old tree in Lantzville that is so prolific that the ground is literally covered with a thick layer of ripe berries. The owner harvests the berries by simply placing a sheet of plastic on the ground and shaking the tree. He sells the berries the same day at the Cedar Farmer's Market.

Because we get such an excess of berries during the summer we have had to come up with some creative ideas on how to utilize our favourite berry. We eat fresh berries every single day and at time of writing, on October 11, I have picked the last of the berries for the year - four months after picking the first one! Of course, we also craft jams with them and this year we combined Red Huckleberries and Spearmint into the mix to make HuckleMuckle Jam. Very tasty but perhaps a bit too addictive.



We also make, well, our own berries out of them. Let me explain. When I get a big pick I will run them through a juicer to get rid of the stems. The pulp is then thrown into a turbo-blender along with several Fuzzy Kiwis and apples that we grow. This thick slurry is then put into a turkey marinade injector and plopped onto parchment paper and dehydrated in the oven. The resulting berry shapes taste like



apricots. We call them 'Mulki Berries'.

Then there are the leaves. Some people make tea from the green leaves that taste sweet. The leaves can also be chopped up and added to soups. Deer fight over the leaves and prefer them over fig or plum leaves. The heart-shaped leaves are huge and exhibit the most amazing trait in the fall. They change shape and become lobed just like a fig leaf! The leaves also have an unbelievable 20% protein value, the highest of any plant and right below cereals. Did you know feedlot beef only has 16% protein?

We usually eat smoothies every morning that are made from berries and some greens from our gardens. During August our lettuce crop was pretty much depleted so my wife threw a couple Mulberry leaves into our daily berry smoothies. Oddly, she then made comment that the addition of the Mulberry had her perplexed.

To see why, look at the two glasses of strawberry smoothies. The colour difference is subtle yet noticeable. The top one has lettuce leaves added to it but the brighter pink one has the Mulberry leaves that are obviously loaded with antioxidants. This prompted an online search to find some amazing facts about this hybrid plant. I could go on forever but suggest you look online to discover them for yourself.



We have not made any discoveries with the roots yet but I'm guessing they have some kind of special attribute as well because they are different from any other plant. They are a bright yellow colour with a strong medicinal smell and unlike any other that I have seen.



And the bark is yet another element to consider. It peels off the branches in long, thin, continuous strands and resembles string. I suspect one could braid it into a rope to make garden ties for plants.

In closing, there is one more tale left to tell of this wondrous tree that graces our Food Forest. The branches can easily grow over 10 feet long and become thick and strong and pliable. One could harvest about 20 of these every year. Among other things, we use these tall branches for growing cucumbers. We tie a string to the top and jam the bottom of the branch into the soil. The cucumbers happily grow vertically up the string allowing us to grow more food on the ground. Also, the branches bend nicely into an arch and form a strong framework for making a plastic covered hoop house that we can grow winter vegetables under.

These truly are Plants of Worth . . .