



## Meet the Strawberry Tree

by Cathy Ronk, UC Master Gardener Program

### Name:

The Strawberry tree is a charming evergreen tree with clusters of small, bell-shaped flowers alongside strawberry-like fruit in addition to showy cinnamon-colored bark and dark green leaves. A member of the heath family, it belongs to the genus *Arbutus*, of which there are at least fourteen species of flowering shrubs and trees. *Arbutus unedo* is indigenous to southern Europe and Ireland. *Arbutus menziesii*-- called Madrone, Pacific Madrone, Madroña, or Madroño, is native from British Columbia to Southern California in Coast Ranges, occasionally in middle elevations of Sierra Nevada.

"*Menziesii*" honors the tree's discoverer: Archibald Menzies (1754-1842), a Scottish surgeon, botanist, and naturalist. The name Madroño is ascribed to Father Juan Crespi, chronicler of the 1769 Portola expedition that led to the founding of Alta California.



### Interesting Facts:

- In Ireland, *Arbutus unedo* is called Killarney Strawberry tree and Irish Strawberry tree. A traditional Irish ballad, "My Love's An Arbutus," compares the arbutus tree with the evergreen qualities of true love.
- The name **unedo** is attributed to Pliny the Elder, a Roman author and naturalist, who in 50 AD allegedly claimed "unum tantum edo," meaning "I eat only one."
- The Strawberry tree makes up part of the coat of arms (El oso y el madroño, The Bear and the Strawberry tree) of the city of Madrid, Spain. The Puerta del Sol ("Gate of the Sun") is the location of the most famous symbol of Madrid: a 20 ton statue of a bear eating fruits from a tree.

### Description:

The Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) grows 8-35 feet tall and wide with a slow to moderate growth rate. It is used as a single or multi-trunked ornamental tree, and as a specimen or hedge shrub in gardens and public landscapes. When grown as a tree instead of a shrub, basal sprout or suckers are kept pruned off. Trunk and branches, with reddish brown, shedding bark, often become gnarled with age. Dark green leaves with red stems are 2-3 inches long. Bunches of small white (rarely pale pink), bell-shaped flowers hang in abundance at the tip of the branches. Pollinated by bees, the round, 3/4-inch fruit, matures yellow to red in twelve months, and appear at the same time as the next flowering. The edible fruit is somewhat sweet but often bland and mealy. Dwarf varieties, all narrower than tall, include: '**Elfin King**' (5 feet tall, flowers and fruits almost continuously), '**Oktoberfest**' (6-8 feet tall with deep pink flowers), '**Compacta**' (10 feet tall). The Strawberry tree is drought tolerant when established and attracts hummingbirds, butterflies, and birds.



Madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*) is one of the most widely distributed tree species native to the Pacific coast. Mature height varies from 20 to 100 feet. It forms a broad, round head almost as wide as tall. The smooth,

reddish brown bark that peels in thin flakes and the nodding white, honey-scented flowers of Madrone are reminiscent of its shrubby cousins, the manzanitas. Round, fleshy, rough-coated, ½-inch fruits are red to orange and ripen in late fall to early winter—much loved by birds. Madrone is a long-lived tree but is very difficult to establish.

Arbutus 'Marina' was introduced into the nursery trade in the mid-1980's as a hybrid with uncertain parentage. It is the easiest Arbutus to grow as a single-trunked tree. A slow to moderate grower, maturing to 20-40 feet tall and wide is a good garden substitute for A. menziesii. The branches bear 4-5 inch long dark green, leathery, serrated leaves that are bronze when they first emerge. Its attractive mahogany-colored bark exfoliates periodically. Clusters of pendulous, bell-shaped rosy pink flowers are produced in spring, appear sporadically through summer, and then a second heavy bloom occurs in fall. The fruit matures from yellow to red, and the fruit from last season remains on the tree as it produces this season's flowers. The fruit is edible with gritty flesh and mild, kiwi-like flavor.

### Care:

The Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS IV) rates the **Madrone** as a "low water use" native tree in the shade in the Central Valley. **Arbutus 'Marina'** and **Arbutus unedo** are both rated as "low water use." The WUCOLS project was initiated and funded by the Water Use Efficiency Office of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). Work was directed by the University of California Cooperative Extension. WUCOLS IV provides evaluations of the irrigation needs of over 3,500 plant groups used in California landscapes at [www.ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS](http://www.ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS).

Madrone is the most challenging Arbutus in a garden, but if successful, it is magnificent. When attempting to grow Madrone outside its native area, it is imperative to start with a small (gallon-size) tree and plant in fast draining soil with nonalkaline water, in bright shade, or on an eastern slope. Death during the first few years most frequently stems from improper watering—either too much or too little. Its sensitive root system can scorch in the container if left in direct sun for even short periods of time. Madrones are susceptible to branch dieback and other fungal diseases. Older Madrones produce ongoing organic debris from shedding small branches, bark, leaves, flowers, and fruit.

Strawberry tree tolerates the widest variety of soils and climates, but appreciates good drainage. Plant Arbutus in the fall or winter in sun or part shade. Some shade is definitely needed in the desert. Water thoroughly after planting, and regularly through the first year. Deep watering encourages deep rooting. A 3-inch layer of organic mulch will help conserve water, but be sure to keep the mulch away from the tree trunk. Once established, allow the soil to dry out between waterings. Occasional pests are scales, thrips, and aphids. Diseases include Phytophthora, root rot, and other fungal diseases promoted by wet winters or poor drainage.

Prune in winter to remove dead or diseased wood. To produce an open-crowned tree, carefully thin to expose branches. Stake the standard tree for a couple of years because the crown can be heavy with thick, broad leaves. Mass plant several multi-trunk Arbutus, leave unpruned, for an evergreen screen. Fertilizer is usually unnecessary.

### Design Tips:

Mix Madrone with other native plants, such as: barberry, bush anemone, ceanothus, Dara's Choice sage, coral bells, California goldenrod. Holiday decorators harvest and string the fruit like popcorn and cranberries.

The Strawberry tree is a small to medium sized evergreen accent tree providing year round interest in western gardens. Possible companion plants include: 'Little John' bottlebrush, salvias, gaura, rockrose, phlomis, and santolina. The boughs from the Strawberry tree make appealing centerpieces for fall and holiday tables, when the flowers and fruit are at their best.