

# CALIFORNIA HUCKLEBERRY

**Latin:** *Vaccinium ovatum*  
**Rumen:** Soyoso; Soys

## TRADITIONAL EDIBLE USES:

California huckleberries are a highly prized treat. Unlike their relative, the American blueberry, huckleberries have bright, red flesh and a distinctive flavor. Berries are harvested in late summer and early fall and may be eaten raw, frozen, dehydrated, or cooked.

They are made into jams, jellies, syrups, puddings, pies, and cakes. They are sometimes mixed with other fruits to prepare a variety of desserts.

## TRADITIONAL MEDICINAL USES:

All huckleberry species are rich in immune-boosting Vitamin C. The Makah make an infusion of the leaves, which is then sweetened and fed to postpartum mothers to give them strength. An infusion of the leaves is used to stabilize blood sugar. The twigs are used to make a detoxifying decoction, which is ingested in moderation.

Huckleberries can be found throughout redwood and other coniferous forests, along coasts and bays, usually at lower elevations. California huckleberries prefer partial shade and can tolerate moist to slightly dry soils, as well as sandier soils.

## HARVESTING

Harvest the leaves when they are soft and green by pinching them off at the base of the petiole. The berries may be harvested by hand, but many tribes use berry rakes, which are more efficient without sacrificing sustainability. Berry rakes gently run through the shrub, removing the berries while leaving the leaves and branches intact.

## TRADITIONAL FIRE MANAGEMENT

Local tribes have been burning huckleberry patches for thousands of years. This encourages shrub regeneration. Huckleberries are adapted to fire, and their underground root structures, or rhizomes, promote speedy growth following a fire. Fire management is a ceremonial practice that demonstrates respect for the plants and the land.

## IDENTIFICATION



*Atropa belladonna*, also known as deadly nightshade, is another purplish-black berry that grows in similar habitats.

However, California huckleberry fruits do not have the distinctive bracts present on deadly nightshade fruits.



## STRUCTURE & BARK

This shrub, part of the blueberry family, can grow to a height of 2–8 feet and spread up to 15 feet wide. With a slow growth rate, it spreads horizontally while also growing upright. Younger twigs have smooth, reddish bark, while mature plants and branches develop darker gray bark that becomes rough and slightly peels and cracks over time.



## LEAVES

The leaves grow in opposite pairs along the branch, one on each side, with a crenulate edge. Lanceolate in shape, they are dark green with a leathery or waxy feel, and have a lighter green underside. These small leaves range in size from less than half an inch to 1.5 inches in length.



## FLOWERS

In the spring and winter, pinkish, bell-shaped flowers, characteristic of the Ericaceae family, grow in clusters of 5–10. These flowers then give way to small berries, about 0.5 inches in size, which ripen between early September and December.



## BERRIES

Huckleberries produced later in the season tend to be more flavorful, and shrubs exposed to daily fog generally have a higher yield. Unlike blueberries, which have place flesh, huckleberries have deep red flesh. Once harvested in the summertime or early fall, the berries can be eaten raw, frozen, or dehydrated. They are often made into syrups, jellies, jams, cakes, pies, and mixed with other berries for a variety of desserts.