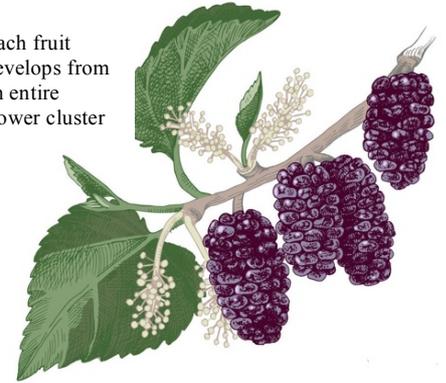


Mulberry

Here we go round the mulberry bush, mulberry bush, mulberry bush...
Here we go round the mulberry bush,
On a cold and frosty morning...

Each fruit develops from an entire flower cluster



Mulberry trees have been cultivated since time immemorial; contrary to what the familiar nursery rhyme says, they are not bushes, but large spreading trees with dark green toothed leaves. The fruit is a multiple or collective fruit i.e. each fruit develops from an entire flower cluster. Immature fruits are white, green, or pale yellow, turning from pink to red, dark purple or black while ripening. There are ten species and numerous cultivars, the three better known species are: The black mulberry (*Morus nigra*), believed to have originated in the mountain region of the Southern Caucasus, grown primarily for its fruits, this is the common mulberry of Britain and northern Europe; the white mulberry (*Morus alba*), native to the central and eastern mountains of China, this species has been cultivated for its leaves to feed silkworms, it has also been used in traditional Chinese medicine; the red mulberry (*Morus rubra*), from North America, this species has an interesting spreading shape, with a short, stout trunk, crooked branches forming a dense broadly round-topped crown, its fruits are edible just like the black mulberries.

It seems that the mulberry tree spread westward in cultivation at a very early period in recorded history. The tree was referred to in the Bible; the Latin poet Ovid related the Babylonian legend of Pyramus and Thisbe, who were slain beneath a mulberry tree, its fruits being fabled to have thoroughly changed from white to deep red through absorbing the blood of the ill-fated lovers.

According to F.A. Roach in his book "Cultivated fruits of Britain" (1985), attempts were made to establish silk industries in England early in the 17th century. King James I (1608) had 4 acres of mulberry trees planted where Buckingham Palace now stands; for a brief period, there appeared to be hope that Britain might be able to produce some silk, however the project failed because the black mulberry was cultivated in error whereas the white mulberry is the species on which the silkworm feeds. This historic 'mulberry garden' has now been reduced to one mulberry tree, the only one remaining among King James' plantation in 1608, known as the Charlton House heritage mulberry (see the plaque). Mrs. Maude Grieve in her "A Modern Herbal" (1994 edition) wrote that 'this tree still bears fruit, but is in no way remarkable either for size of its trunk or the spread of its branches'. Apparently, it still bears fruits today, according to Peter Cole of the Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust, who describes it as 'gnarled trunks and branches corkscrew in all directions under a canopy of rough, heart-shaped leaves'.

Mulberry tree can live as long as 600 years or more. Apart from being renowned for its longevity, it is also known as the wisest of trees because it never buds until the cold weather is past. It has been suggested that the generic name '*Morus*', also the original Latin name for mulberry, comes from *demorari*, meaning to delay, referring to the tree's habit of forming buds only after the last frosts are gone.

Mulberry tree is one of the easiest trees to care for. Unlike raspberries and boysenberries which prefer a cool climate, mulberries can be grown in most parts of Australia. They generally are tall tree and, when mature, can easily transit from delight to nuisance if not kept in check, as they are self-fertile, spread without effort and can grow in between sidewalks or along the foundation of houses. While people love the fruits, birds also love them, the tree is a beacon that attracts messy guests. The dropped and squashed fruits will stain driveways and patios, often getting tracked into the home where they can permanently stain carpets. Luckily, fruitless versions have become available in recent years, perfect for homeowners who just prefer the shade the tree provides. Some 'modern' varieties can also be pruned to remain a shrub; dwarf varieties suitable for pots and small gardens are now readily available in many garden centres.

M. macroura 'Shatoot' is a smaller growing mulberry tree with long white fruit, said to be best for home gardens as it is small and does not produce fruit that stains. *M. alba* 'Pendula' is the smaller weeping variety providing good food for silkworms. *M. nigra* 'Hicks Fancy' is a black variety recommended for cool areas. *M. nigra* 'Black English' is another black variety that has prolific fruit over a short season. *M. rubra* 'Everbearing Downings' is a variety of red which comes from North America.

Mulberries are best enjoyed straight off the tree as they are too fragile to handle packaging and shipping, also they do not ripen after they are picked. The fruits can be conserved or used to make wine and drinks. Sitting on a mulberry tree and feasting on its fruits is a very pleasant experience particularly for young children; however, it is a mother's nightmare since the fruits stain faces, hands and everything in sight. Luckily the stains can be removed with the juice of a green (unripe) mulberry.

Mulberries leaves, root bark, branches and fruits are listed in the Chinese Pharmacopoeia; other parts like wood, ash and sap are widely used medicinally, most usually all parts are dried for use in decoction or poultices. The fruit is also much used in folk medicine, especially in the treatment of ringworm. Economic use includes the leaves which are fed to silkworms, the trees' milky sap which will coagulate into a sort of rubber has been thought to give adhesive strength to the filament spun by the silkworms. The wood is used to make containing barrels for ageing balsamic vinegar and traditional plum brandy, and in the manufacture of small sports equipment like rackets and bats. The red mulberry produces strong fiber from its inner bark which can be used for cordage, paper and some coarse cloth.

