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SUMMER-HOLLY (COMAROSTAPHYLIS DIVERSIFOLIA)

PHILIP A. MUNZ*

As was pointed out by McMinn (Jour. Calif. Hort. Soc. 10:21, 1949), the Summer-Holly "is one of the less known of our California native shrubs." Since coming to the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in 1946 I have been much impressed with this plant. It has an excellent year-round foliage; it is lovely in its spring bloom. Its bunches of bright red fruits are most attractive in August and September. It will endure some summer irrigation, even in heavy soils, in a way that *Fremontia* and many other California shrubs cannot, although excessive water yellows the foliage. I have been impressed too by its difference botanically from the manzanitas (*Arctostaphylos*) to which it has been referred and where I myself kept it in my Manual of Southern California Botany, p. 370, 1935. So altogether, horticulturally and botanically, I have found it an intriguing plant.

Comarostaphylis agrees with the genus *Arbutus* (Madroño and Strawberry Tree) in having the surface of the fruit granular or warty, whereas in *Arctostaphylos* (Manzanita) the surface is smooth or merely glandular. Moreover, the California manzanitas bloom in winter or very early spring, but Summer-Holly has its flowers in late spring. From *Arbutus* it differs in having them in an unbranched cluster or raceme instead of a branched cluster or panicle. The flowers of all three are very much alike: small white or pink (in some manzanitas) urn-shaped corollas, calyx deeply cleft, stamens twice as many as the corolla-lobes and the anthers having a pair of reflexed awns on the back, ovary mostly 5- (or in Manzanita sometimes 10-) celled and with 1 ovule in each cell. *Arbutus* is found in North America and in Europe and Asia, *Comarostaphylis* from California to Central America, and *Arctostaphylos* mostly in western North America, with a single species (*A. uva-ursi*, the Bearberry) extending north into the subpolar regions and through them into Eurasia.

Summer-Holly is an erect evergreen shrub or even a small tree, 6-15 or more feet high, with grayish bark and dense foliage. The leaves are oblong to elliptic, somewhat saw-toothed, leathery, 1-3 inches long, on very short petioles, deep green above and lighter, almost woolly beneath. In the plants from the mainland of San Diego County the leaves are revolute along the edges, while those from the islands and more northern mainland are almost plane. The racemes may be solitary or clustered, mostly 1-2 inches long in the San Diego County form and twice that in the insular. They stand out away from each other at the time of flowering so that the small white pendent blossoms remind one from a distance of Lilies-of-the-Valley. A large shrub covered from the

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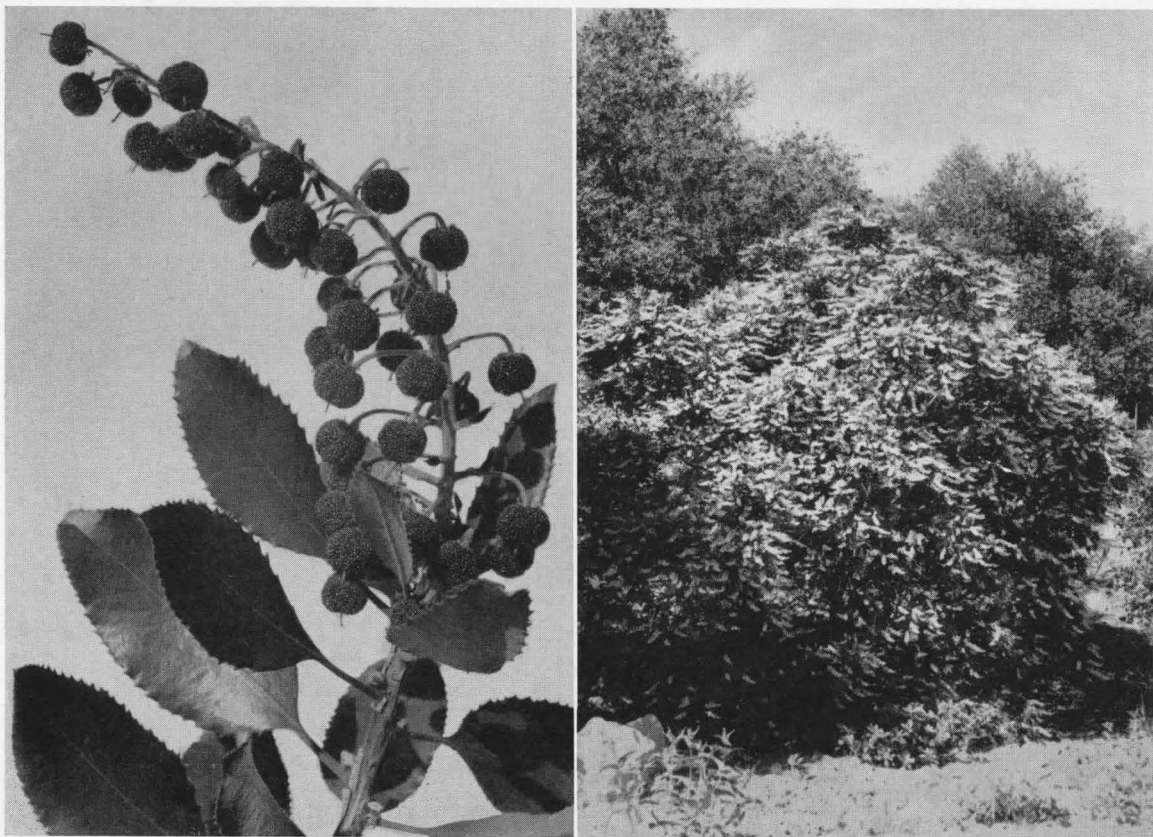


Plate XXVI—*Comarostaphylis diversifolia* var. *planifolia*, the Summer-Holly. To the left a branch of red fleshy fruits in August. To the right a shrub in the Botanic Garden in flower in May. Photos by Robinson and Wolf.

ground up with myriads of these dainty flowers is very attractive. The round red fruits of late summer are about one-fourth inch in diameter and add a second period of interest each year.

As a wild plant, *Comarostaphylis diversifolia* is found at rather low elevations, probably not over 1500 feet, and fairly near the coast: in the Santa Ynez Mountains of Santa Barbara County, the Santa Monica Mountains of Los Angeles County, on Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and Santa Catalina Islands, and in the hills near San Diego and adjacent Lower California. The insular form has been made var. *planifolia* by Dr. Jepson (Fl. Calif. 3:29, 1939). Mainland material from north of San Diego County seems doubtfully distinct from the insular form. With its longer racemes it is more desirable horticulturally than more southern plants.

Coming from near the coast and at rather low elevations, the Summer-Holly is probably not able to withstand very low temperatures, exactly how low I have not been able to determine. In the cold winter of 1948-1949 the temperatures at the Botanic Garden went down to about 27°F. and there was no evidence of any harm, and in 1937-1938 recorded temperatures of 22°F. showed no effect. One of the leading California nurseries gives in its catalogue 15°F. as the low temperature for the species. On the other hand, J. W. Besant (Gard. Chron., series III, 80: 67, 1926) wrote that a plant tried at Glasnevin and protected by a wall was not hardy. So far as I am able to judge from the literature and our experience in the Garden, it should have about the same tolerance of cold as does *Camellia japonica*.

Summer-Holly will stand pruning. Sometimes long central shoots begin to form and develop without much branching, but they are easy to control. With proper trimming about once a year, the shrub can be kept compact if desired. If a taller plant is wanted, very little or no pruning may be necessary. The full beauty is obtained by larger rounded plants with their covering of upwardly curved spreading racemes, but if desired for accent or hedge a more narrow growth is easy to maintain. Because of the height that can be had, the shrub is excellent for background planting.

McMinn, writing in the San Francisco Bay region, says: "Plants grown in the sunnier and warmer parts of the coastal areas set more flowers and fruits than those that are cultivated in the more foggy and cooler localities." From our experience at the Garden I would say that such is not the case in the drier air of Southern California. Here plants in full exposure to the sun flower beautifully, but in the summer the foliage is not so deep a green and the fruit is not so red as on plants in partial shade. For the hot interior of the southern part of the state I would recommend trying partial shade, such as on the north or east side of a building, for best development.

Seeds should be planted in the fall in seed flats containing mixtures such as sandy loam and leafmold or loam covered with vermiculite or sphagnum. When they have their second pair of leaves the seedlings can be transferred to 3-inch pots and later to gallon cans. They should be kept partially shaded during the next summer's heat and by fall will be 8-12 inches high. Winter is a good time to set them in the garden. They will succeed best in rather gritty well-drained soil, but will grow also in heavier soils. Plants raised at the

Botanic Garden have not flowered until several years old or when 4-5 feet high. In eleven years some plants grown from seed have attained a height of about 14 feet in particularly favorable situations, others being smaller. Although they grow faster with occasional summer irrigation, after they are once established they will live without it in seasons with 12 or more inches of rain.

From the foregoing it would seem that this shrub should do well in coastal and foothill areas of Southern California at elevations where winter temperatures do not fall below 20°F. Farther north with a cooler and more moist climate it apparently succeeds best away from the immediate coast.