

## **Wintergreen** *Gaultheria procumbens*

Although the term “wintergreen” applies to any plant that remains green throughout the year, the “Wintergreen plant” is a title that refers to the genus *Gaultheria* and is notable as the original source of the wintergreen oil used in flavoring candies, chewing gum, and toothpaste.

*Gaultheria procumbens* is native to northeastern North America. Technically a small shrub, it grows 6 to 12 inches tall and spreads only about 4 inches annually. The dark green glossy leaves are less than an inch long, alternate, simple, and oval-shaped with bristly-toothed edges. When crushed, the leaves release the distinct scent of wintergreen.

In favorable conditions, our native Wintergreen can bloom twice a year, in spring and then again toward summer's end; so a plant can have ripe berries, green berries, & blooms all at once. The small dangling flowers can be difficult to see, but are uniquely urn-shaped, pale white in color, sometimes tinged with pink. The bright red berries are actually dry capsules surrounded by fleshy calyx, 6–9 mm in diameter. The fruit, which are edible, can be positively identified by a five-pointed star on the underside.

Wintergreen is not eaten in large quantities by wildlife, but its regularity of use points to its importance. The berries, which persist throughout winter, provide food for squirrels, chipmunks, deer, mice, grouse, partridges, bobwhites, turkeys, and even red fox in emergencies. One of the few sources of green in winter, the leaves are relished by deer and bears.

Wintergreen has gained a number of regional names such as Teaberry, Leatherleaf, Boxberry, and Canadian Mint. Once famous as a native tea, its use as tea has fallen since people have forgotten how to prepare it. While the leaves can be harvested at any time of year, they must be fermented before drying to make tea.

Native Americans taught white immigrants to use Wintergreen leaves medicinally. It actually contains the same methyl salicylates that are in aspirin and also has antiseptic qualities. However, the oil of wintergreen can be toxic if ingested in large amounts.

Wintergreen provides a beautiful ground cover suitable for woodland plantings, rock gardens, or heather gardens. But it can be difficult to grow unless it has the right conditions: cool, damp, well-drained, acidic soil amended with organic matter, light to full shade. It will not tolerate heavy clay or limey soil. It is propagated by seeds or rhizomes.

More photos and information are available at:

<http://www.paghat.com/wintergreen.html>

<http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/gaupro/all.html>

<http://www.rook.org/earl/bwca/nature/shrubs/gaultheriapro.html>

<http://www.hort.uconn.edu/plants/g/gaupro/gaupro1.html>