

Tree of the Month, March 2014: Arbutus, Pacific madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*)

It's hard to resist stroking the cool, smooth bark of an arbutus tree. The bark is cinnamon-brown on saplings, but as the tree matures, the outer layer begins to peel, revealing fresh, olive-green inner bark. The striking two-tone bark, combined with shiny green leaves and twisting branches, make *Arbutus menziesii* stand out in the landscape. No one knows why the bark peels, but there are several theories; peeling bark could help shed fungi and parasites from the tree trunk, or allow rapid growth and expansion of the trunk, or maybe expose the inner bark to sunlight for photosynthesis to occur.

Arbutus can grow 6-30 meters tall, but usually not more than 20 m in cultivation. They can live to be 200-250 years old, possibly more. When arbutus get older than 250 years, the centre of their trunk starts to rot, so we can't measure their age because the earliest tree rings have been lost. There is a rare mushroom, *Tubaria punicea*, wine-red and 3-inches tall, that grows only in the rotting heartwood of old *Arbutus menziesii*.

Arbutus menziesii is the only broadleaf evergreen tree native to Canada. In the summer, the old leaves turn red and drop from the tree as new leaves grow to replace them. Arbutus has white, urn-shaped flowers that attract honeybees, and bright red berries that birds like to eat in the autumn.

Arbutus is found along the west coast of North America, from southern BC (mostly Vancouver Island and Gulf Islands) down to southern California. They only grow near the coast, and do best in well-drained soil in climates with warm dry summers. In Vancouver, the healthiest specimens are often found near sidewalks or parking lots, where the summer heat is stronger.

Arbutus was first written about by Father Juan Crespí, a Franciscan missionary who was part of Gaspar de Portolá's 1769 expedition to explore California. Crespí, a native of Majorca, kept a journal during his travels, and mentioned seeing "madroños" growing near the California coast. Madroño is the Spanish common name for *Arbutus unedo*, a close relative of *Arbutus menziesii* that grows in Spain (and is featured on the Madrid coat of arms). "Madroño" eventually became Pacific madrone, which is still the common name for *Arbutus menziesii* in the United States. In Canada, we call it arbutus. Another common name for the species is refrigerator tree, since the bark always feels cold.

Records of Spanish explorations of North America were kept secret by the Spanish government, so credit for the first description of *Arbutus menziesii* goes to Archibald Menzies, who was the naturalist with Captain Vancouver's expedition to the Pacific Northwest in the 1790's. Menzies took some samples of arbutus and sent them to be identified and recorded. The species was named after him. In his notes, he called them "oriental strawberry trees" – strawberry tree being the English common name for *Arbutus unedo*.