Hughie Jones – Nov 2013

Arbutus menziesii - Ericaceae

10 species of flowering plants in the genus. Native to warm temperate regions of North America, the Mediterranean, and western Europe.

When you first see this magnificent tree, it has the look of a tree belonging to another climate. The contrast of reddish peeling bark with shiny green leaves makes you think of the Mediterranean. The white scented flowers in spring, much loved by bees, are followed by bright red berries. The arbutus is Canada's only broadleaf evergreen and can grow up to 30 metres or more.

The arbutus is a tree for the wild. It grows in the sun on rocky ledges by the ocean in southwest British Columbia right down to southern California. In British Columbia it never ventures more than 8 km from the coast and grows along with Garry oak and Douglas-fir. Unfortunately, its range in this already narrow strip is decreasing with development, invasive plants such as broom and gorse, and fire suppression. In time the Douglas-fir shade out the arbutus.

The arbutus is not a tame garden tree. In fact, it is not a tree to be cultivated. Transplants do not usually succeed. Trees grown by seed have little success and are prone to fungal diseases. Arbutus trees don't like any disturbance to their tap root or the soil around them. Like most broad leafed evergreens, arbutus continually drop something – flowers after blooming, leaves and bark throughout the year. This is not a tree for the tidy gardener.

For the Straits Salish nation the arbutus tree is special. It saved them in the great earthquake and flood. Their canoes remained anchored to an arbutus half way up a mountain, while the other trees had broken. This is a flood in all the oral histories of the northwest coastal nations and changed the landscape.

We now know the exact date of the earthquake. It was a massive one and hit the coastal waters in 1700. At that time the world map showed North America missing the Pacific Northwest, an unexplored area. But there were records in Japan of a tsunami in 1700.

The most important clue linking the tsunami in Japan and the earthquake in the Pacific Northwest comes from studies of tree rings (dendrochronology). Studies of the tree rings of the drowned red cedars show the outermost rings formed in 1699, the last growing season before the tsunami. There are many areas in the Pacific Northwest with underwater groves of trees that show evidence of the earthquake.

It was almost one hundred years later (1792) that Archibald Menzies collected a sample of the tree named after him. He would have been happy to know that this tree had a special place in the hearts of the Salish and pleased that its leaves and bark had many medicinal uses for first nations.

Plants of Coastal British Columbia – Pojar & Mackinnon; Trees and Shrubs for Pacific Northwest Gardens – Grant & Grant; Trees of Vancouver – Gerald Straley
http://washingtondnr.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/ghostforest-timw-comp.jpg