

There is a delightful common, native, large shrub or small tree in the family Ericaceae. This is a term that means nothing more than the Erica Family. The family consists of azaleas, blueberry and so many wonderful wild plants and cultivated garden hybrids and cultivars. All are woody plants, but the one that is so outstanding is *Vaccinium arboreum*. The range is so widespread that the common people know it by a number of names. Sparkleberry, farkleberry, winter huckleberry and tree huckleberry are just a few. It is of general knowledge that when a plant has so many common names, it is well known. So it is with *Vaccinium arboreum*. It comes as a shock to many people that the plant is not a huckleberry at all, but is a blueberry. It is seldom offered in the nursery trade because people like something "exotic" in appearance, something that has to be purchased and not dug from the wild. So, times have made a complete circle, as many folks like to grow native plants but do not like to dig them from the wilds. The native tree huckleberry is difficult to dig from the wild and is slow to grow from seed. (Just poke the berries in the soil and keep watered.)

Identification of the tree huckleberry is easy. It makes a large shrub or small tree, perhaps 25 to 20 feet tall with a large crown. The trunk is usually branched or well forked and the main trunk just above the ground can be up to six inches in diameter. It is in the main flush of mid-spring that the tree is in its great splendor with every twig on every limb on every branch bearing a multitude of dainty bell shaped white flowers. The flowers entice every bee and pollen seeker to partake of the goodness within. After two weeks or so, the united corollas fall and little green fruit will develop all summer long. By early fall the fruits have developed their size, about ¼-round, but remain green. Meanwhile, as the fruits are developing, the leaves are growing and they are lovely in a bright green, up to about two inches long and an inch wide. Most are a bit smaller in size. Then in the mid-autumn, the leaves turn to shades of red and the berries turn black. The fruit contain many seeds, which is the characteristic that separates blueberries and huckleberries. Huckleberries contain ten large seeds. Blueberries have many small seeds. The black colored berries hang on the tree throughout much of the winter and then the fruit-eating birds devour them in an orderly manner. While the fruits are not poisonous, they are not delicious as other blueberries, so it is the birds and small mammals that eat them. The dangling berries have a beauty all their own. Really, there is something Oriental about the beauty of this tree in all of its aspects. Like flowering dogwood, it is a tree with beauty in all seasons. In addition to birds and small animals eating the fruit, so do children. The flavor or taste varies from a dry greenish sour to a dry sweetish taste. Even for most children, only a few berries are sufficient and if more than a few are eaten, the mouth is left with a blackish coloration. Nothing to worry about as the boys certainly do not, regardless what worrying mothers think.

Tree huckleberries are best grown as a specimen tree in the lawn or on the edge of a planted woodland. They are long lived and furnish beauty to the house places as well as the countryside. Usually, volunteers or seedlings come up in desirable, and perhaps at times, undesirable places but it is usually left to its own way of living. One feature that doesn't satisfy most growers, is they tend to send up root sprouts. Frequent mowing or just snipping down with hand clippers quickly eliminates these. This is a tree to enjoy in all seasons and that usually means picking and eating a few ripe fruits in the winter, especially on a warm afternoon stroll over one's property. Carl Amason is a superior plantsman who lives and gardens near Calion, Arkansas.