

[Other Excerpts from This Book](#), [Overview of This Book](#), [Other Books](#), [More Plants](#), [Buy This Book](#), [Home](#)

Mulberries (*Morus species*)



From [Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild \(and Not So Wild\) Places](#)

Illustrations and photos by "Wildman," clipart from [Clipart.com](#)



Red Mulberries

The ripe fruit of this common tree is very dark purple, nearly black, although unripe

fruits are reddish.

There are two common mulberry tree species, the native red mulberry (*Morus rubra*), and the Asian white mulberry (*Morus alba*). The red mulberry, which reaches a height of about sixty-five feet, with rough, reddish-brown bark.



Red Mulberry

The aggregate fruit, composed of lots of berries stuck together, each with its own seed, is long-oval in shape, and hangs from a short, slender fruit stalk.

The white mulberry only grows up to forty feet tall, with rough, lighter, ochre-gray bark and spreading branches. Mulberry bark has distinctive vertical cracks or furrows, with an occasional orange-brown streak between the cracks.

Both species have roughly oval, toothed, alternate leaves 2-6" long. Sometimes they're variably lobed, sometimes they're unlobed. The red mulberry's leaves feel like sandpaper underneath. The white mulberry's leaves are smooth underneath.

As the new leaves develop in mid-spring, tiny male and female flowers hang on separate small, slender, inconspicuous spikes. The male cluster is longer, the female rounder.



Male (long) and Female (round) Mulberry Flowers

It's the rounded female flowers that will become the fruit.

When the female flowers are fertilized, an aggregate fruit results. It's globular to cylindrical, 1/2" to 1-1/2" long, hanging from a fruit stalk.



White Mulberry

I used to think white mulberries were red mulberries falling to the ground before ripening until I noticed that mature white mulberries are soft, moist and sticky. Unripe berries are dry and hard.

Other very similar, locally-distributed edible species include the Texas mulberry (*Morus microphylla*), and the black mulberry (*Morus nigra*). Sassafras also has lobed and unlobed leaves, but they're fragrant and untoothed. There are no poisonous look-alikes.

Raspberry and blackberry fruits superficially resemble mulberries, but the fruits of these unrelated thorny canes grow upright, on receptacles, with no fruit stalks.

Ripe mulberries come in different colors: red, white, pink, and black. These colors are attributed to two different species and their hybrids.



Pink Mulberries

Because these wind-pollinated trees hybridize so easily, most wild mulberries in North America have genes from both red and white species.

The red mulberry has red unripe berries. They darken to black, with reddish undertones, when they're ready to eat.



Red Mulberries

Note the rounded, somewhat oval toothed leaves.

When I first started gathering mulberries, before reading my first field guide, I noticed that some neighborhood trees' berries never seemed to ripen, falling to the ground still white. I finally caught on that these were white mulberry trees. Even though they're white when ripe, they're soft and juicy.

**White Mulberries**

The black seeds are clearly visible as they contrast with the white berries.

White mulberry trees were imported from Asia in the 1800s to start a silk industry. Growing silkworm caterpillars and unrolling the cocoons to make silk was too labor-intensive for us, and the effort was abandoned. But because mulberry trees are so prolific, most of America is now graced with the two species plus hybrids.



Pink Mulberry

This fruit is also sticky-moist when ripe.

You're most likely to find mulberries in residential neighborhoods, parks, in fields, especially along the edges, open woods, and near fresh water. They grow throughout the country, ripening in late spring and early summer.

You can spot ripe mulberries in season from a distance because the fruits make such a mess on the ground. I love taking children mulberry-gathering. Everyone holds up a drop cloth, while I climb into the trees and shower the drop cloth and kids with fruit. Do this on a nice day preceded by sunny weather, because rain washes away berries' flavor.

Use mulberries immediately. They won't last more than a couple of days in the refrigerator. They soon ferment or get moldy, probably because of their high water content and thin skins. This is why you rarely see them in stores. Eat them, cook them, dry them, freeze them, just don't let them spoil.

There are many ways to cook mulberries once you've eaten your fill of fresh

fruit. Cook them in their own juice until the mixture becomes liquid, and make a sweet mulberry slurry. Add a little lemon juice and orange rind to offset the sweetness, stir in a thickener and you have a pudding. I've made mulberry pies and mulberry muffins. You can do anything with mulberries you do with virtually any other berry, and they dry and freeze well. Lemon or lime juice enhances their flavor, since they don't have the acidity of other fruits.

Dried mulberries are more crunchy, like (related) figs. You can grind them in a the blender, and mix in nut butter, sweetened to taste, to make a mulberry candy.

You can also use the young, unopened leaves in the spring. Boil them for twenty minutes and discard the water, for mild, tasty vegetable. This water, the unripe berries, uncooked young leaves, and mature leaves are toxic and mildly hallucinogenic. While they won't kill you, they'll give you a terrific headache and an upset stomach. The primary hallucination is that you're so sick, you're going to die. However, you'll probably eventually recover.

How did red mulberries get their color? The answer lies in "Pyramus and Thisbe," the first love story ever written, compiled by Ovid from earlier Greek folklore:

[Pyramus and Thisbe](#) were neighbors who fell in love when they became adults. Their parents disapproved, but the lovers communicated secretly, through a crack in the wall separating their houses. One night, they eloped, but Thisbe was frightened away from their rendezvous point by a white mulberry tree by a bloody-mouthed lion that had just finished a meal. She escaped and hid, but lost her cloak, which the lion mauled and bloodied.



Pyramus, seeing the bloody mouthed lion and the cloak, imagined the worst, and impaled himself on his sword. His blood colored the mulberries red. When Thisbe found him and realized what had happened, she followed him to death on same sword. The European mulberry species has been red ever since.

In traditional European medicine, the mulberry root is a remedy for tapeworms. The tree's inner bark (cambium) has been used as a laxative. The fruit, eaten in very large quantity, may also mildly laxative.

[Mulberry Recipes](#)

[Other Excerpts from This Book](#), [Overview of This Book](#), [Other Books](#), [More Plants](#), [Buy This Book](#), [Home](#), [Back to the Top](#)