Arbutus unedo
Strawberry-Tree

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INTRODUCTION

Most often seen as a multi-stemmed, rounded, evergreen shrub or small tree reaching 8 to 15 feet in height with an equal spread, Strawberry-Tree is capable of reaching 20 to 25 feet in height, and makes a very attractive specimen tree when pruned to a short, single trunk (Fig. 1). The trees take on a picturesque, somewhat twisted appearance over time, and exhibit dark, red/brown, flaking and shreddy bark accompanied by the lush, dark green, leathery, red-stemmed leaves. Growth rate is slow so trees over 20 feet tall are rare.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: Arbutus unedo
Pronunciation: ar-BEW-tus YOO-nee-doe
Common name(s): Strawberry-Tree
Family: Ericaceae
USDA hardiness zones: 8B through 11 (Fig. 2)
Origin: not native to North America
Uses: container or above-ground planter; hedge; large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; screen; specimen; residential street tree
Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

DESCRIPTION

Height: 8 to 18 feet
Spread: 8 to 20 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms
Crown shape: round
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: slow
Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: serrate
Leaf shape: ob lanceolate; obovate
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: broadleaf evergreen; evergreen
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: pink; white
Flower characteristics: fall flowering; showy; winter flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: red; yellow
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; suited for human consumption; fruit, twigs, or foliage cause significant litter; persistent on the tree; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; showy trunk; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; no thorns
Pruning requirement: requires pruning to develop strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: green; reddish
Current year twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; alkaline; well-drained
Drought tolerance: moderate
Figure 3. Foliage of Strawberry-Tree.

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem
Winter interest: tree has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers
Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more
Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time
Pest resistance: no pests are normally seen on the tree

USE AND MANAGEMENT

In fall and winter, the small, white or pink blooms in two-inch-long panicles appear at the same time the previous-year’s fruit are ripening. These unusual fruits have a rough, pebbled outer surface which ripen from yellow to red and persist on the tree throughout the winter, adding much to the tree’s overall attractiveness.

Although the fruits look appealing, their bland taste seems to be popular only with birds.

Strawberry-Tree spreads quite wide as it grows taller and produces dense shade, making it ideal for use as a small shade, screen, hedge, or patio tree. The appearance of both fruits and flowers during the winter months also makes this plant very popular for specimen plantings. It is one of the most attractive small trees available for residential use but unfortunately is not normally available in the east. It should be grown and tried in the Deep South.

Strawberry-Tree will grow at a slow pace when planted in either full sun or partial shade on well-drained, acid soil. Plants are tolerant of wind and some drought once established and grow in well-drained clay.

The cultivar ‘Compacta’ is a smaller shrub, six to ten feet tall and wide; ‘Elfin King’ has a contorted, dwarf form, flowers and fruits year-round; ‘Rubra’ has deep pink flowers.

Propagation is by seed or layering.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.