

Wintergreen

(*Gaultheria procumbens*)

By Barbara Nuffer

A simple joy on a late winter or early spring walk is finding shiny, living leaves and brightly colored berries along the side of the trail. Wintergreen, a beautiful New York native, is adorned with thick green- to burgundy-colored leaves and brilliant red berries. Crush one of the berries or break a leaf and you will be rewarded with the distinctive wintergreen scent. Although it grows close to the ground at a height of two to six inches, wintergreen is considered a shrub. It is a member of the heath family, which includes rhododendrons, azaleas, heaths and heathers. The common name wintergreen and the species name *procumbens* (meaning prostrate), describe how the plant is found poking its glossy leaves and scarlet berries up through pine needles and snow on the forest floor.

In 1753, the plant's genus was named for Jean-Francois Gaultier, a Canadian physician and botanist who was studying

the plants of Quebec. A common name in Quebec for wintergreen is a "petit thé du bois," which translates to "little tea of the woods." Both the leaves and the berries were used to make tea, as another common name, teaberry, indicates.

A waxy, 1/4" long, pinkish-white flower blooms in the summer and looks like a drooping bell, but it is actually made up of five petals. The flower's shape is similar to that of blueberry, a close relative. Bumblebees pollinate the flowers to produce the small berries, which are filled with orange-yellow seeds.

Wintergreen has been valued as a medicinal plant for centuries. The

Mohawk tribe brewed the leaves, which contain methyl salicylate (the active painkiller found in aspirin), into a pain-relieving tea. The Iroquois used it for analgesic purposes and to relieve cold symptoms. Native Americans cooked the berries into pies or ate them raw. Oil of wintergreen, derived by steam distillation of the leaves, was used as a flavoring agent in candies, such as "Teaberry" brand chewing gum. Wintergreen flavor was later derived from the more common sweet birch and now it is synthesized artificially.

As you enjoy walking year round in the woods of New York, remember to look down for this attractive plant closely hugging the ground. If you are lucky, you will find the lustrous green or burgundy foliage and the attractive scarlet berries that many bird and animal species enjoy eating.

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