

Common Name: Blackberry

Scientific Name: *Rubus fruticosus* agg.

Family: *Rosaceae* **Alternative Names:** Bramble.

Range: Throughout British Isles

Habitat: Woods, scrub, hedgerows, waste ground, roadsides, heathland

Key Identification Features: Rather than a single species, blackberry is classed as an aggregate of several hundred closely related micro-species and as such is highly variable in leaf shape, flower colour, fruit shape, size and flavour and in the number and size of the thorns. In the main it is a scrambling shrub up to 3m, with arching, angular stems covered in backward-pointing sharp thorns. The leaves are normally made up of 3-5 (sometimes 7) leaflets, which oval or oblong with pointed tips and a serrated edge. They are usually covered in whitish hairs on the underside. The flowers appear usually in May or June and grow in panicles (branched elongated inflorescences) on the previous year's stems and are white or pale pink with five large often crinkled petals. The fruit is an aggregate fruit comprising of a cluster of drupelets which start appearing from June onwards, initially green then turning red and finally purplish black when ripe, and always shiny.

Confusion Species: There are several other *Rubus* species growing in the UK. The closely related Raspberry *R. idaeus* has long, rounded no angular, none branching stems covers in softer, hair like prickles. The underside of the leaves have a distinctive silver colour to them with a woolly feel. The flowers and fruit form earlier than Blackberry, the flowers have narrow erect white petals and the fruit is red and downy when ripe. The species which most closely resembles Blackberry is the Dewberry *R. caesius* which grows in damp woodlands on basic soils. The plant is generally smaller than Blackberry with rounded stems which have fewer prickles. The fruit has fewer, larger drupelets and has a bluish, waxy bloom on it instead of being shiny.

Edible Uses: There can be few people who aren't aware that you can eat the fruit from Blackberries. The softer fruit, which are generally the ones that ripen earlier, can be eaten raw or used to make sorbets, coulis and fools etc. The harder fruit tend to be less sweet so are better cooked and made into jams, puddings, vinegars or flavouring liqueurs such as Bramble Whisky. Perhaps less well known is the fact that the young leaves and shoots in spring and early summer are also edible. Collect them whilst the thorns are still completely soft to the touch and with the shoots they shoot snap off crisply. Both leaves and shoots can be boiled or steamed and served as a vegetable, and they can be added to soups like nettle soup. The leaves are nice blanched for a few minutes in boiling water, drained and then fried in olive oil with onions and garlic. The young leaves can also be eaten raw when very young and have an unusual coconut like flavour and the young stems can be peeled and eaten in salads. The leaves can also be made into a tea, by partially fermenting the leaves you can actually make a tea which is on a par with genuine black tea.

Medicinal Uses: The leaves and also the root bark contain considerable amounts of tannins. Both can be used to make infusions or decoctions and have been used to treat diarrhoea, haemorrhoids, cystitis, sore throats, mouth ulcers and gum inflammations, and as a general mouthwash. It's use as an anti-diarrhoeal is well documented both in humans and animals. The unripe red or even green berries can be used in the same way. The berries are full of vitamin C and minerals and can be made into a syrup to use against colds and flu. The leaves also contain a reasonable amount of vitamin C.

Other Uses: The tough stems can be de-thorned with a knife or tough gloves and used as is as a tough binding or lashing. It can be processed in a similar way to nettles to extract the fibres and then made into cordage. The stems as well as being tough are also flexible and can be used instead of willow to weave baskets. The thorns have been used to make fishing hooks.





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