

## Nature Notes, October 2023

### Pick Your Poison

By Anna Leighton

Red berry, black berry, orange berry, white;

Bitter berry, pitty berry, sour berry - quite!

Crunch them, pound them, squeeze them and bite

All the berries, except the white.

Is the rhyme correct in implying that white berries are not good to eat? Let's look at the three common plants in central Saskatchewan with white berries: baneberry, snowberry and red osier dogwood.

Baneberry (*Actaea rubra*) has clusters of shiny, oval, white berries with a dot in the middle, giving them the name "doll's eyes." These are poisonous. Baneberry is a plant of rich woods, such as along the river bank near Saskatoon, and the berries grow about knee high.

Snowberry, which includes both buckbrush and western snowberry (*Symphoricarpos occidentalis* and *S. albus*), has round, soft and white berries (although on buckbrush they are greenish white, then turn blue and brown as they ripen). They are reputed to have poisoned children in the past. Buckbrush grows in patches on the open prairie and western snowberry, in shady spots: along thicket edges and in woods.

Red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea* ssp. *stolonifera*), a wild shrub planted as an ornamental for its red bark, produces clusters of white berries by mid-summer. Like baneberries, these have a small dot on the end. They are not poisonous despite the local name "poisonberry," but they are said to be extremely bitter. Red osier dogwood bushes grow several metres high, and the berries are clustered at the branch tips, often at eye level.

What about the other berries mentioned in the rhyme? You might know these. All are visible on the bushes now and all are edible.

The red berry, bitter and crunchy, is thorny buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*). These grow along the top of the river bank, on slopes and on the open prairie. Buffaloberries can be eaten safely in small quantities and make a wonderful jelly



**Red baneberry is poisonous.** Photo by Alan Schmierer

**White baneberry, also known as doll's eyes, is poisonous.**

Photo by Joshua Mayer

(which takes care of their small, stony seeds).

The black, pitty berry that is pounded is chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*). Chokecherries make good syrup, jelly and wine, all preparations which remove the large, round pit. The rhyme calls them the berry that is pounded because local indigenous people have traditionally used them after pounding (or grinding) them, pit and all. The season for chokecherries is just about over, although a few dry fruits remain on the bushes at the moment.

The orange berry, quite sour and squishy, is, of course, the high bush cranberry (*Viburnum opulus* var. *americanum*). High bush cranberries are abundant this year. Look up in the rich riverbank forests to see these berries hanging in opulent clusters just above head height. Soft and squishy, with a large flat pit, they too excel as a jelly berry.

What about other red and black berries in our area - are they safe or suspect? Most of our red berries are edible BUT some baneberry plants have red berries instead of white doll's eyes, and these red berries are poisonous. The black berries of European buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) resemble those of chokecherry, but they are definitely not good to eat, being a cathartic. Hawthorn's red fruits, looking like miniature apples, are reputed to be dangerous for people with a heart condition.

As the shrubs drop their leaves, you can see the abundant fruits of summer still attached to bushes where many remain throughout the winter. Keep in mind that there is no simple rule to tell which to eat; there is no substitute for learning which berry is which before you pick them.

*Anna Leighton is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society.*