

## Tree of the Month, October & November 2016: Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo* 'Compacta')

Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), with its serrated evergreen leaves and peeling orange bark, is attractive all year-round, but is especially lovely in autumn because its fruits and flowers appear at the same time. In late September and early October small fragrant, white, urn-shaped flowers begin to appear amid last year's round green fruits, which ripen to yellow, orange and eventually red. The flesh of the fruit is yellow, mealy and edible but only mildly sweet. The specific epithet, *unedo*, comes from a quote attributed to Pliny the Elder, who supposedly said "*unum tantum edo*", Latin for "I only eat one", in reference to the fruit. Despite the uninspiring taste, the fruits are made into jams and liqueurs in Portugal, Spain, and Albania. *Arbutus unedo* is featured on the coat of arms of Spain's capital city, Madrid, along with a bear standing on its hind legs grazing on the fruit in the tree.

Strawberry tree normally grows 5 to 10 meters tall, with multiple, twisted trunks and branches. The cultivar 'Compacta' is a dwarf form of the species, growing only 3 meters high with a more compact shape. Old reference books mention that 'Compacta' doesn't fruit or flower much, but modern specimens produce plenty of each, so the cultivar may have changed over time.

*Arbutus unedo* has a lignotuber – a swelling at the base of the tree that contains carbohydrates and dormant buds. If a fire destroys the trunk and branches, the tree can survive on the energy stored in the lignotuber until the crisis is over, and then regenerate by sending up new shoots.

*Arbutus unedo* is native to the Mediterranean coast from southern Europe to northern Africa. It is also found in southern Ireland, especially near the lakes of Kerry County, where they can grow as large as 15 meters tall! Another common name for this tree is the Killarney strawberry tree, named for the town of Killarney and Killarney National Park in Kerry County, where many of these large trees have been protected from development. No one knows how *Arbutus unedo* made the nearly 2000 km jump across the Celtic Sea from the Iberian Peninsula to Ireland, especially since the species is not present in England or Wales. It is possible that the species could have migrated across a land bridge between Europe and the British Isles during the last ice age, but computer models of sea levels in that area suggest that the climate in Ireland would have been far too cold for *Arbutus unedo* to survive until long after the ice began to melt and the land bridges disappeared; thus the mystery persists.

At VanDusen, *Arbutus unedo* 'Compacta' can be found in the Mediterranean Garden.