

Saratoga Horticultural Research Foundation, Inc.
15185 Murphy Avenue
San Martin, CA 95046
(408) 779-3303
www.saratogahortfoundation.org

Arctostaphylos densiflora 'Howard McMinn'

The genus Arctostaphylos is represented by some 50 species of shrubs, occurring chiefly in North and Central America. In California, the genus reaches its greatest development, with about 40 species indigenous to the state. These shrubs range in size from creepers to small trees. Most of them are characterized by crooked branches with thin, smooth, red to purple madder bark that exfoliates in certain seasons in flakes. It is these singular branches that attract the interest of those who see the plants for the first time.

On the Pacific Coast, most species of Arctostaphylos are known as manzanita, the diminutive in Spanish for apple--manzana--so-called by the Spanish Californians because of the resemblance of the green berries of this shrub to tiny apples.

Among the species and horticultural varieties in cultivation, Arctostaphylos uva-ursi, commonly known as bearberry or kinnikinnick, is probably the most widely known. In the wild, this species extends around the world in the northern latitudes. It is an attractive mat-forming shrub, with white to pinkish flowers in the spring, followed by bright red or pink berries in the autumn. The most beautiful plants of this species yet seen by the writer were in a rock garden in the autumn at Bar Harbor, Maine.

Arctostaphylos densiflora 'Howard McMinn' is a selection from a rare species confined to a small area in the Vine Hill

region of Sonoma County, California. M.S. Baker, in LEAFLETS OF WESTERN BOTANY, 1932, states that "The known plants of this rare species will scarcely number 100, and all but a half dozen of these are confined to the banks of a single road for a distance of scarcely 500 feet." When the writer last visited this area in 1956, most of these plants had been sprayed with oil by road maintenance crews, and it is believed that the native stand has now almost disappeared.

Seeds collected from these plants through the years have produced extraordinarily variable seedlings. A number of these variants were grown by the late Howard E. McMinn, Professor of Botany at Mills College, in the native plant garden on the Mills College campus.

Impressed with the growth habits and lustrous foliage of several of these individuals, Dr. McMinn suggested that the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation test several forms under varied conditions with a view to possible introduction of the more desirable types. Cuttings were subsequently taken from two of the shrubs in January, 1952, and the resultant cutting-grown progenies planted at the Foundation and elsewhere in the spring of 1953. One selection was a low-growing, compact form and the other a taller, more loosely branched shrub. Both had slender, crooked stems and attractive bark. When these shrubs first bloomed in March, 1955, the lower growing form attracted a lively interest because it was densely clothed with compact clusters of flowers of an unusually deep shade of pink. This form has been propagated by

cuttings, and is now being distributed in large numbers. The variety was named Arctostaphylos densiflora 'Howard McMinn' as a measure of recognition of forty some years Dr. McMinn had devoted to stimulating a popular interest in native California trees and shrubs.

Arctostaphylos densiflora 'Howard McMinn' is a low, spreading, evergreen shrub about five feet high and six to eight feet (or more) wide, with slender, crooked main stems and branches having smooth dark red to purple madder bark. The glossy, leathery, dark green leaves are three-quarters to one and one-half inches long and three-eighths to three-quarters of an inch wide. The flowers are rose-pink, urn-shaped, about one-quarter inch long, in dense, globose panicles terminating the branchlets.

When established, the McMinn manzanita requires a minimum of care. Experience would indicate that it prefers an eastern or northern exposure and should make a suitable and durable bank cover. Under favorable conditions, the trailing branches take root. The hardiness of this variety is not fully known, though it probably would not survive under temperatures of 15 degrees fahrenheit.

Adding to its distinction, this cultivar was granted an Award of Merit in 1956 by the California Horticultural Society.

Other manzanitas since introduced by the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation are: Arctostaphylos bakeri 'Louis Edmunds', A. densiflora 'Harmony', A. densiflora 'Sentinel',

A. hookeri 'Monterey Carpet', A. hookeri 'Wayside', A. stanfordiana 'Fred Oehler', A. stanfordiana 'Trinity', A. uva-ursi 'Point Reyes', and A. uva-ursi 'Radiant'.

Maunsell Van Rensselaer
Saratoga Horticultural Foundation
Saratoga, California