
Strawberry Tree

Krista Pendergrass

The Strawberry Tree (*Muntingia calabura*), also known as Jamaica Cherry, is a multipurpose tree that quickly grows to 8 to 13 meters in height. The tree produces a small red fruit, but is largely valued for its wood. It is remarkably fast-growing for a tree having such hard wood. Fruits are produced only 1.5 to 2 years after seeding. An infusion of leaves can also be drunk as an herbal tea.

The wood of the Strawberry Tree is esteemed mostly for its use as firewood. The wood, when dry, ignites quickly, producing intense heat and a high flame with very little smoke. Julia Morton, in her *Fruits of Warm Climates*, writes that Jamaicans prefer the Strawberry Tree wood to any other wood when cooking. The wood is also strong and light in weight, making it easy to work with and durable for indoor carpentry use. The bark produces a fiber for twine and ropes. Enough cellulose is contained in the fiber to make it a potential source of paper pulp.

The one-centimeter round fruit is best when eaten fresh out-of-hand. At ECHO, no form of cooking the fruit has been palatable, although other sources say it can be used in tarts and jams. Fruits are produced during all but the coldest winter months at ECHO and subtropical areas, but should produce year-round in tropical climates. Fruits are produced only 1.5 to 2 years after seeding. An infusion of leaves can also be drunk as an herbal tea.

Another important use of the Strawberry Tree is to provide shade for nursery plants, agricultural crops, livestock, and urban areas. The tree grows tall with spreading, almost horizontal branches. The dark green leaves and white flowers that resemble strawberry blossoms make it an attractive addition to homes and gardens (Figure 1).

The Strawberry Tree can grow at altitudes up to 760 meters, even at 1300 meters in Colombia. The tree is drought resistant, but grows best with 1000 to 2000 mm (40 to 80 inches) of rain per year. It does well in poor soils and can tolerate acid or alkaline soils, but is not salt-tolerant.

Native to southern Mexico, Central America, tropical South America, and several islands in the Caribbean, it is now cultivated in Hawaii, some Pacific islands, and Southeast Asia to the extent that many people consider it native. It is also considered a weed in some countries due to the spreading of the tiny seeds by birds and bats.



Figure 1: The Strawberry Tree produces white flowers that resemble strawberry blossoms. Photo by Angela Nelson.

The tree can be cultivated by cuttings or by the hundreds of small seeds in each fruit. At ECHO, we cultivate the tree for our Edible Landscape Nursery by using seed fresh from the fruit. No experimentation at ECHO had been done using dry seeds until this year. We have found that when the [incredibly

tiny] seeds are cleaned, dried, and put in storage, they are viable for up to four months. This knowledge now allows us to send Strawberry Tree seeds out to our network.

If you are working not-for-profit in a developing country, you may request one sample packet of strawberry tree seed free of charge. Note that the seeds are so tiny that special care will be needed to start them. Directions on how to clean your own seed and a plant information sheet containing information about how to care for a young plant will be sent along with the seed packet.