

Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*



*'See even now, in hedge and thicket tangled, One brave and cheering sight:
The leafless branches of the blackthorn, spangled
With blossoms starry white!'*
a verse from 'The Blackthorn Fairy' by Cicely Mary Barker

***Prunus spinosa* (blackthorn, bair or sloe)** is a species of *Prunus* native to Europe, western Asia, and northwest Africa.

The specific name *spinosa* is a Latin term indicating the pointed and thorn-like spur shoots characteristic of this species. The common name "blackthorn" is due to the thorny nature of the shrub, and its very dark bark.

Prunus spinosa is a large deciduous shrub or small tree growing to 5 metres (16 ft) tall, with blackish bark and dense, stiff, spiny branches. The leaves are oval with a serrated margin. The flowers are 1.5 cm (0.59 in) diameter, with five creamy-white petals; they are produced shortly before the leaves in early Spring, and are hermaphroditic and insect-pollinated.

The fruit, called a "sloe", is a drupe 10–12 mm (0.39–0.47 in) in diameter, black with a purple-blue waxy bloom, ripening in autumn, and harvested traditionally in October or November after the first frosts. Sloes are thin-fleshed, with a very strong astringent flavour when fresh. The fruit is similar to a small damson or plum, suitable for preserves, but rather tart and astringent for eating, unless it is picked after the first few days of autumn frost. This effect can be reproduced by freezing harvested sloes.

The juice is used in the manufacture of spurious port wine, and used as an adulterant to impart roughness to genuine port. In rural Britain, so-called sloe gin is made from the fruit, though this is not a true gin, but an infusion of gin with the fruit and sugar to produce a liqueur. In Navarre, Spain, a popular liqueur called *pacharan* is made with sloes. In France a similar liqueur called *épine* or *épinette* or *troussepinette* is made from the young shoots in Spring. In Italy, the infusion of spirit with the fruits and sugar produces a liqueur called *bagnolino* (or sometimes *prunella*). Wine made from fermented sloes is made in Britain, Germany and other central European countries. Sloes can also be made into jam and used in fruit pies, and if preserved in vinegar are similar in taste to Japanese *umeboshi*. The juice of the berries dyes linen a reddish color that washes out to a durable pale blue.

The shrub, with its savage thorns, is widely grown as a hedge plant, making it "cattle-proof". Blackthorn can also act as a 'nurse plant' in a grazed field, allowing other plants (such as broadleaved trees) to develop protected from possible damage by grazing animals. In the 19th century, bundles of blackthorn branches (along with those of gorse or 'furze', *Ulex europaeus* and young elm, *Ulmus* species) were buried to improve field drainage.

Blackthorn makes an excellent fire wood that burns slowly with good heat and little smoke. The wood takes a fine polish and is used for tool handles and canes. Straight blackthorn stems have traditionally been made into walking sticks or clubs (known in Ireland as a shillelagh).