

American Mountain-ash

Sorbus americana



The American mountain-ash is not a true ash, though it is limited to mountains in the southern Appalachians. This is a small northern tree that follows the highest elevations of the Blue Ridge southward from its main range in the Northeastern U.S. It is rarely seen, and more rarely successfully cultivated, below 4000 ft. elevation. The farther north one travels in these mountains, the lower the elevational range of tolerance becomes, and the tree occurs near sea level in New England.



The genus *Sorbus*, to which this tree belongs, includes over 20 European and Asian species, most known as Rowan-trees. In the eastern U.S., we have only two species. All of these Rowan-trees generally prefer a cool temperate climate, so

few can be grown successfully in the hot, humid summers of the southeastern US. There are some with simple leaves, others with compound leaves. The American mountain-ash has pinnately compound leaves, suggesting the leaf of an ash (*Fraxinus*), though there are many more leaflets in its leaf than you will find in any ash leaf. The leaflets are sharply toothed and sharply pointed at the tip, completely hairless and with a red leafstalk. The twigs are likewise smooth and hairless, as are the red, conical buds. There is a strong odor in the scraped bark of twigs and branches, like that of candied cherries.

The white flowers appear, depending on elevation, from May to July in the mountains of NC, each flower tiny but collectively borne in a flat-topped mass that can be 3-6 inches across. Later, from September to October, the clusters of red berries put on a second show, often outlasting the yellow fall color of the leaves. Each berry is about ¼ inch diameter, and is a favorite food of many migrant birds, especially cedar waxwings. The fruit may be entirely eaten by flocks of birds before November, or they may last into the winter until frozen/blown from the branches by the harsh climates of the high mountains. The fruit can be cooked and used for jellies or wine for consumption by man; raw fruits are generally not palatable to most folks, having high acidity and astringent flavor.

American mountain-ash is a signature tree of the high balds and conifer forests of the Blue Ridge. It is instantly recognized, seasonally beautiful, and intolerant of culture at lower elevations. Because of its sensitivity to heat stress, disease, and insect pests at these lower elevations, the use of another species of mountain-ash is usually cultivated in such places. The European mountain-ash, *Sorbus aucuparia*, is our most commonly planted species. It differs in having more bluntly-pointed leaflets with larger, blunter teeth on the margins, and white hairs on the buds and twigs. It also has larger berries (1/4-1/2 inch) of a more orange color, rather than red.



The dependence of American mountain-ash upon the climate of high Blue Ridge elevations puts this species on few planting lists in ornamental horticulture. Where a cool climate with short growing seasons and ample moisture are available, this small tree is an excellent ornamental. It should be given appropriate space, and best vigor is seen in full sun.