

ROSACEAE · ROSE FAMILY

California Blackberry

Rubus ursinus

—
POMO · KASHAYA POMO · MAIDU

Native Range: Western North America — British Columbia south through California to Baja California, east to Idaho & Montana

⊕ About This Plant

California blackberry is a native trailing vine or low mounding shrub, growing 2–5 feet high and spreading more than 6 feet wide on prickly, arching canes. Unlike the aggressive invasive Himalayan blackberry, the native blackberry is a more delicate, graceful plant with smaller, incredibly sweet and aromatic berries that ripen from dark red to black. It is dioecious — male and female flowers grow on separate plants — which is unusual for the genus.

The leaves usually have 3 leaflets (sometimes 5), are deciduous, and the white flowers have narrower petals than most related species with a pleasant fragrance. The berries, though small (under an inch), are considered by many to be far superior in flavor and aroma to any cultivated variety. This native species is one of the parents of the loganberry, boysenberry, and marionberry — some

of the most beloved cultivated berries in the world trace their genetics back to this wild California plant.

Growing Conditions

LIGHT

Full sun to part shade (best fruit in sun)

WATER

Low to moderate — drought tolerant but best berries with some summer moisture

SOIL

Adaptable — prefers well-drained, organic-rich soil

HARDINESS

USDA Zones 6–9

MATURE SIZE

2–5 ft tall, 6+ ft wide, trailing habit

GROWTH RATE

Moderate to fast — canes root at tips when touching soil

BLOOM

White to pink flowers, April–August. Fragrant. Berries ripen June–August.

HABITAT

Forest edges, disturbed areas, streambanks, woodlands, and open meadows throughout western North America.

Traditional & Cultural Uses

Food — Fresh & Preserved

The berries were a major seasonal food source for many tribes across the plant's range, including the Pomo, Kashaya Pomo, Maidu, Kumeyaay, and Coast Salish peoples. Berries were eaten fresh in summer, and dried and combined with meat to make cakes stored for winter use. Unripened berries were soaked in water to make a cool, refreshing drink.

Tea & Beverage

The Saanich dried the leaves to make a pleasant-tasting tea, while the Quileute used both dried leaves and stems for tea — not medicinal, simply enjoyed for its flavor. The Kashaya Pomo also canned berries for winter use.

Medicinal Preparations

Roots were boiled in water to make various medicinal preparations. The Pomo and Kashaya Pomo brewed leaf teas to treat stomach ailments and diarrhea, while the Kumeyaay used bark decoctions for dysentery. The fruit and stems were used to produce tonics.

Natural Dye

The berry juice produces a rich purple-black dye used for staining fibers, baskets, and other materials.

A LIVING RELATIONSHIP

California blackberry is one of those plants that reminds you the land has always been abundant — you just have to know where to look. The tiny, intensely flavored berries are a taste of what California offered before the grocery store. Every cultivated boysenberry and marionberry carries the wild genetics of this native vine. When you taste the fruit, you're tasting what Pomo families tasted in these same Mendocino hills.

Medicinal Uses

Digestive Relief

Root and leaf preparations were widely used as remedies for diarrhea, dysentery, and general stomach upset. The leaves and roots are rich in tannins, which tighten intestinal tissues and reduce fluid loss.

Astringent & Wound Care

The tannin-rich leaves and bark were used as astringent washes for sores, mouth ulcers, and minor wounds. The Kwakiutl used preparations for antihemorrhagic purposes.

Women's Health

Various *Rubus* species were used for gynecological purposes by several tribes, with leaf tea supporting women's health through different life stages.

Ecological Role

Wildlife food source — Berries are eaten by dozens of bird species, bears, raccoons, foxes, and small mammals. The plant provides critical habitat cover.

Pollinator support — Flowers attract native bees, butterflies, and beneficial insects. Western tiger swallowtail larvae feed on the plant.

Erosion control — Vigorous root systems and trailing canes stabilize streambanks and disturbed slopes.

Fire ecology — Resprouts vigorously after fire, quickly providing ground cover

and food on burned sites.

Native vs. invasive — Unlike Himalayan blackberry, California blackberry does not form impenetrable thickets and supports more diverse native plant communities.

|| Propagation

- 1 **Tip layering:** The easiest method — trailing cane tips naturally root when they touch soil in fall. Sever the new plant from the parent in spring.
- 2 **Root suckers:** Divide established plants by separating rooted suckers in early spring.
- 3 **Seed:** Berries can be mashed, seeds cleaned and cold stratified for 90 days, then sown in spring. Germination is variable.
- 4 **Cuttings:** Semi-hardwood cuttings taken in summer can root with moderate success.
- 5 **Planting note:** Plant 2–3 plants to ensure fruiting, as male and female flowers are on separate plants.

