Arbutus Unedo—Strawberry bush

By Cass Turnbull

Years ago, when I worked for the Parks Department, I got a call in October from someone who was dying to learn about the shrub that had yellow, orange and red balls and little white flowers. It took me a moment to locate it mentally. “Oh, that’s a strawberry bush. *Arbutus unedo,*” I said. Now there’s a practically flawless plant: its red branches twist and peel with age; it has glossy broadleaf, evergreen leaves; and is almost pest, and disease free. I guess they occasionally freeze to death in a very cold winter around here. But in general, *Arbutus unedo* tolerates a wide variety of conditions, including wind swept beaches and clay soils. And then there are the fruits and flowers, ornamental but understated. The fruits (“strawberries”) are edible but rather bland and mealy. Its clusters of urn-shaped flowers identify it as a member of the ericaceous family. *Arbutus unedo* is little brother to our endangered Madrona trees (*Arbutus menziesii*). I think of it as big brother to the manzanitas, also beautiful but hard to keep alive here. Your average strawberry bush grows to be 8-35 feet tall. That’s pretty dang big. Nurseries mostly sell *Arbutus unedo* ‘Compacta’, which is more in the 6-10 foot range. There is a true dwarf called ‘Elfin King’. It stays about 5 feet tall, good for your planter box or entryway pot, flowering and fruiting all year long.

**Pruning**

**Thin-Out or Limb-Up**

Generally speaking, one does nothing to the strawberry bush for many years. When it gets old and appears too imposing, you can thin it out to reveal the nice internal branch structure. And thinning it out makes it airy and delicate-looking. If you take off many of the lowest side branches too (called skirting or limbing up), you can turn a large strawberry bush into a nice, small strawberry tree. This process is called ‘arborizing’. Strawberry bushes do not water sprout easily, so they can be pruned a fair amount. My guess would be that up to a third of the foliage can be removed without stimulating sprout response. Follow the instructions for pruning “tree-like shrubs”. Start with the deadwood. Thin off many small side branches, spreading those cuts evenly throughout the plant. Take some, and leave some. Don’t confuse thinning with “stripping”, which is when all the laterals are skinned off, leaving only a little foliage at the ends of the branches. On the other hand, you can just leave your strawberry bush fully dressed to the ground, especially if it functions as a screen.
Grab-and-Snip

I suppose someone might need to tidy up a strawberry bush at some point, or slightly reduce the size. If it is being allowed enough room to grow to its adult size, 6 feet or so, I don’t suppose a great deal of harm will be done by making a few judicious selective heading cuts. Locate the branch that sticks up over your window; follow it down to where it meets up with a shorter side branch. Cut it off there. Repeat with the next worst branch that interferes with foot traffic or touches the house or whatever. You are forbidden to shear this plant, because it is so nice. (Even though I suspect that it puts up with such treatment pretty well.) At least the one down at Dick’s Drive-in seems to be doing okay. I probably shouldn’t say this in print.

Radical Renovation

Arbutus unedo does stump sprout sometimes. And that’s good news if it has been over-thinned or freezes to the ground. Or if, for some unfathomable reason, you need to cut it to the ground and regrow it. I saw a large, lovely old arborized strawberry tree freeze back one year. It sprouted from 1” to 6” up the trunk; the sprouts grew into a new bush around five feet tall, although its stems are straight and thin. It will take another 15 years for them twist and curve, and become the well-tapered trunks of the original. My hubby says one in three will regrow.