

## Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*

### What's in a name?

This species is described as a shrub rather than a plant. Despite this, it can grow up to 5m (16') tall. Unsurprisingly, the name is directly related to the dark smooth bark and the unusually long dark grey thorns. In Latin, 'spinosa' refers to the pointed and thorn-like spur shoots which grow from the base of the shrub.

These are sharp and strong enough to puncture even a tractor tyre. The name of the fruit (sloe), comes from the old English word 'slah' which is itself derived from the Saxon word 'slaha'.

### Botany & Ecology

Blackthorn is a member of the Rose family and it is closely related to the Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*). The snowy white blossom appears early in the spring and can be confused with the blossom of some species of plum. The small flowers offer a rich source of nectar and pollen for bees and butterflies.

The foliage is sometimes eaten by the larvae of the Emperor Moth (*Saturnia pavonia*), Brimstone Moth (*Opisthograptis luteolata*), as well as the black (*Satyrion pruni*), and brown (*Thecla betulae*), Hairstreak Butterflies. Dead Blackthorn wood provides food for the caterpillars of the Concealer Moth (*Esperia oliviella*).

The pocket plum gall of the fruit caused by the fungus *Taphrina pruni* produces a long, flat gall which does not contain a stone. A variety of birds, like the blue tit and robin, search the leaves for the caterpillars and other insects in the spring and feast on the berries in autumn.

Despite the very thorny nature of this plant, its dense stocky nature provides a good nesting and roosting environment for many small birds like the great tit and the sparrow. Once the sloe has fallen, it provides food for animals such as voles, mice, foxes and badgers.



### Folklore

Blackthorn is known as the sister of the Hawthorn (*Crataegus species*), the traditions associated with this species are closely related to rural fertility celebrations. The myths or superstitions are often very negative and associated with the very poisonous thorn.

Blackthorn topped the maypole used in Mayday celebrations and was combined with the Hawthorn to make the garland. These spring garlands were often laced with mistletoe and hung on the edge of a village to bring good luck for all living and working there. Special crowns were made by farmers and burned in the spring. The ashes were then scattered on the fields to increase fertility.

A scratch or a shallow puncture of the skin from a thorn will often turn septic, unless treated. During the Witch Hunt (15th and 16th centuries), it was believed that the Devil would prick those whom it wished to work with, with a thorn. Many women believed to be witches were stripped and their body searched for 'the devil's mark'. If any such mark was found, the suspect would be tried and burnt on a pyre of Blackthorn.

### Folk Medicine

The sloe is acidic and it was initially used to burn off warts. It was suggested that the sloe be rubbed into the wart and then thrown over the shoulder. During the 17th century, the juice of the sloe was recommended by doctors to alleviate excessive menstruation but this practice is not present in the current herbalism.

The thorns were boiled and the fluid drained off and ingested to cure diarrhoea both in humans and animals. This practise was common across the UK and continued into the early 20th century. In Scotland, the blossom was prescribed as a laxative, a practise that has not been noted in any published books anywhere else in the UK.

\*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.

