SARATOGA HORTICULTURAL FOUNDATION, INC.

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Arbutus 'Marina'

This highly ornamental, evergreen, flowering tree has all the ornamental virtues and statuesque habit of the native Californian Madrone, combined with the tolerances of the European Strawberry Trees - to which it owes its origins. It is very similar in its characteristics to the common Strawberry Tree (Arbutus unedo) but is probably a hybrid between A. x andrachnoides (one parent of which is A. unedo) and A. canariensis (the latter is also indeed sometimes only given as a variant of A. unedo). Because of its adaptability it can be used for a wide range of purposes in the garden or landscape - as a large bush for screening, as a multi-stemmed structural component, as a single stemmed standard specimen tree or as a sheared but informal hedge or screen.

The largest known specimen of Arbutus 'Marina' is in the San Francisco garden of Victor Reiter, this was planted in 1942 and has reached a height of forty feet with an equivalent spread. The origins of this plant are still unexplained although it is probable that it arrived in San Francisco in 1917 for the Exposition as part of a consignment of plants from Europe. Subsequently a few plants were propagated by Charles Abrahams at his Western Nursery on Lombard Street in the Marina district; at the Closing Down sale of this nursery a boxed plant was purchased for the Strybing Arboretum by the Director, Eric Walther. Victor Reiter was able to propagate his stock from this plant in 1933. A. 'Marina' was evaluated as a potential introduction by the Foundation after obtaining propagating material from this source. It was eventually named and offered in 1984.The cultivar name 'Marina' commemorates the location of the Western Nursery and is a tribute to its owner and one of California's early plantsmen, Charles Abrahams.

The trunk of this tree in terms of character and colour is reminiscent of that of A. menziesii - the native California Madrone. The plant can be trained as a cleaned, single or multi-stemmed specimen so that the strong trunk character and the colour of the bark will make it a very useful structural component within a garden or landscape plan. The satiny, cinnamon-coloured bark on young stems is in striking contrast to the roughish older bark which peels off in one inch curls, an attractive feature which develops even on nursery sized plants.

The foliage is very similar to that of the Strawberry Tree - the elliptical, leathery, dark green leaves being four to five inches long with a prominent central vein. As the young leaves unfurl they have a distinctly orange-red blush which blends well with the red bark of the new stems.

The flower clusters, which may attain a length of as much as six inches, are produced in drooping panicles, which contain as many as one hundred individual flowers. Each small, bell-shaped, typically ericaceous flower is rose red in colour and the overall effect when in full blossom during the late Fall and Winter gives the tree an exotic and dramatic impact. The flowers are also very attractive to Hummingbirds and provide a resource for them at a time when they are generally short of food.

The round, bright red fruits are typical of Strawberry Trees and are about an inch across. Each flower cluster usually produces between two and four of these fruits which become soft with age and eventually fall to the ground. The total production of a well established tree is sufficient to preclude the use of this subject as a specimen for street planting.

The tree needs to be planted in full sun to develop the lush green foliage and an abundance of flowers of which it is capable; if planted in shadier conditions the leaves become larger and darker green and fewer flowers are produced.

A. 'Marina' will require a regular irrigation programme for at least the first two establishment seasons in the landscape, but thereafter should be able to survive on a monthly system of deep watering.

This subject is fairly typical of the family Ericaceae in its growth patterns and structure and will thus produce a relatively shallow and fine root system. This will not usually compete in the surface situation in a lawn as many trees will do. It will also be subject to soil borne diseases such as Rhizoctonia and water mould type fungi unless planted with care, i.e. with the top of its root ball no lower than the surrounding soil level and in a large and well prepared planting hole. Properly planted it will tolerate not only the regular watering of a lawn placement but will also survive the more arid conditions of other sites, while not submitting to the root rots and other problems which cause its local relative to be such a capricious subject. In trials it proved to be resistant to innoculations of Oak root fungus.

Tree; evegreen; flowering; structural component.