

BLACKTHORN *Prunus spinosa*

LATIN EXPLANATION. *proo-nus*; classical name of the plum. Flowering and fruiting trees. *spin-o-sa*; spiny.

HEIGHT - Blackthorn is a deciduous shrub between 1 and 4m (3 to 12ft) in height.

SOIL TYPE - It occurs on a wide range of soils, avoiding only extremely acid conditions particularly where the soil is peaty.

HABITAT - Reaching an altitude of 400m, it is found in open areas and along the edges of woodlands, in scrub and hedgerows. As a plant it is completely hardy, but the flowers can be damaged by severe late frosts. It is not tolerant of heavy shade but withstands exposure to winds in lowland areas.

SHAPE - Blackthorn suckers readily and forms dense thickets if unchecked. Being virtually impenetrable, these thorny thickets provide excellent nesting cover for birds. Blackthorn regenerates quickly after cutting and fast-moving fires, producing suckers from below ground level. It is a very good barrier and hedging species.

ASSOCIATED SPECIES - Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*), dog rose (*Rosa canina*), goat willow (*Salix caprea*), guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*), wild cherry (*Prunus avium*), wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*).

DISTRIBUTION - Blackthorn is found throughout most of the Ireland and Britain.

FLOWERS & SEEDS - Blackthorn belongs to the rose family - each flower has five white petals. The flowers, which open before the leaves in March and April, are borne singly, usually in profusion. After pollination, a 'stone' fruit is formed. It contains a single hard, woody seed in a mass of soft pulp. These blue-black fruits (often called sloes) are very sharp to the taste and ripen in September and October.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Sloe berries are used to flavour gin on a large scale throughout Europe. Take a bottle of gin, 12oz sugar and a pint of fresh sloes - pour into a bottle and seal. Store in a warm place and turn gently each week for three months until the sugar has completely dissolved. Strain through muslin and enjoy either before or after a meal.
- The Irish 'shillelagh', so popular with tourists, is made from the wood of blackthorn.
- Blackthorn's Latin name means literally 'spiny plum'. It is an ancestor of our garden plums.
- Blackthorn stems trimmed and polished to a handsome black surface are used for walking sticks.
- Birds eating the fruit, and carrying the stone elsewhere, help to spread the blackthorn.
- Blackthorn can spread into adjoining land by means of suckers (shoots emerging from the side-spreading roots) where there is good light.
- Dense thickets of blackthorn are particularly favoured by nightingales for nesting. This bird, however, is not resident on the island of Ireland.
- It is the food plant of the larvae of the brown hairstreak butterfly (*Thecla betulae*). The conspicuous white eggs can be seen on the leaves of the plant, but are often removed by annual flailing of hedgerows, leading to the substantial decline of this butterfly.
- The wood has a light yellow sapwood and brown heartwood, it is hard and tough, and takes a good polish. It is used for the teeth of hay-rakes and for marquetry.
- Blackthorn grows very well, even close to the coast. It makes an excellent hedge on its own or as a component of a wildlife hedge.
- A cold snap occurring when blackthorn is in flower is known as a 'blackthorn winter'. At this time, the flowers can look like a late fall of snow lying on the branches.



Blackthorn flowers in early spring.

In a good year, sloes are abundant.

