



"NH Big Tree of the Month – October 2007" American Mountain Ash (*Sorbus americana*)

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Native American mountain ash is easy to identify in late summer and fall by its wide clusters of bright red berries. Its European cousin, sometimes called Rowan tree, has orange-red berries in a more rounded cluster. The compound leaves of the American mountain ash resemble the leaves of sumac and are more pointed than those of the European tree.

Because of the pretty fall berries, and the lovely spring flowers, mountain ash has been planted in landscaping settings. In fact John Eastman, in his informative and fascinating book Forest and Thicket, Stackpole Books, says that "it rivals dogwoodfor it is one of the most beautiful flowering forest trees in spring." Unfortunately, the tree isn't long lasting. Out of its natural habitat and ecosystem, it appears vulnerable to pests and diseases, fire blight and borers.

Obviously this tree grows in the mountains and is common in the New Hampshire Whites Mountains, especially in the 2,300-3,300 foot elevation range, where the climate is cool, windy and humid. While hiking there at the end of the summer, I noticed several very tall ones growing in a sunny location at the base of a steep slope where there was probably plenty of underground water. They were as tall as the surrounding maples; surely 40 feet, but I didn't have my measuring tools. More commonly, these trees grow in a shrubby form because they are a favorite food for both deer and moose, and their browsing results in lots of sprouts. Food for wildlife and ornamental uses are the main values of the tree, as the wood itself has no uses or value.

The flat disks of white flowers appear from May to July. The berries ripen in August and can remain on the tree all winter. The berries are low in fat and very acidic, so one of the last foods for wildlife to choose. Consequently, they are still there in late winter to supply nutrition to the hungry birds. Cedar wax-wings, thrushes and grosbeaks will eventually resort to them. When birds finally eat them they disperse the seeds as the berries are digested. This happens rather quickly:

"In studies to determine the amount of time the seeds are retained in the gut of various birds, the maximum time between ingestion and defecation was 30 minutes, indicating that the distance of dispersal is probably not great but could be on the order of a few hundred feet to a few miles."
Stiles, Edmund W. 1980.

One year while skiing in the ice-covered mountains of New England, I saw ice covered mountain ash berries beside a very steep trail. Happy for any excuse to stop, I skied over to the edge of the trail and gathered a cluster of the frozen berries. While I managed to get them home, the fruity outside turned to mush, but the hard seeds inside remained. Since it was late in the season, I figured they had been through the required cold dormancy period of about 60 days and were ready for planting. Unfortunately that is the end of the story as they did not sprout; tree seed germination is tricky.

The NH Big Tree Committee that measures and maintains the Big Tree records according to the guidelines of the National Register of Big Trees through American Forests has no recent measurements of any mountain ash in the state. A search team is going out to try to find one that was measured in Jefferson in 1979, but since this tree species is short lived, it is unlikely to still be there. This means New Hampshire needs a state champion and county champions for all 10 counties.

If you know of one contact the NH Big Tree State Coordinator, Carolyn Page, carolyn_page@hotmail.com, 603-664-2934, who will pass the information on to the appropriate county coordinator.

Also visit the NH Big Tree web site at: <http://extension.unh.edu/Forestry/FORCTS.htm> for the complete list champion Big Trees.

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