

What Kind of Tree Is That? Databases Help with Plant Identification

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Nov. 3, 2018

Can you identify this tree? It has shiny green leaves, red bark and red and yellow berries on it right now.

Our Master Gardener office receives many questions such as this one, asking us to identify a tree, shrub or plant. It may have a sample leaf or limb, or in some cases a picture that accompanies the description. The more information that you can provide when trying to identify a plant, the better. The tree in the question above was an *Arbutus unedo*, commonly known as the Strawberry Tree.

Here are some sources for identifying a tree or shrub:

If trying to identify a landscape tree, I like Cal Poly's Urban Tree Key at <https://urbantreekey.calpoly.edu/>. This key guides you through a series of questions to help you narrow down the options and then offers you some suggestions for what type of tree it might be with picture to help you with a positive identification. The Urban Forestry Institute at Cal Poly also has a useful website that allows you to search for a tree if you only have a description, or if you want to choose a tree for a particular site. Go to <https://selectree.calpoly.edu/search/>.

The Arbor Day Foundation also has a user-friendly tree identification key that has most of the common trees by region, either Western United States or Eastern United States, at <https://www.arborday.org/trees/whattree/>. This web-based plant identification key is based on the foundation's popular pocket field guide "What Tree is That?" It's somewhat limited in the number of trees that it has, but it does have most of the common trees. I found it useful this summer when I was traveling in Virginia and didn't recognize some of the trees. It's also available as an app.

If you're trying to identify a native tree, shrub or plant, then the USDA Plants Database can be useful. It can be found at <https://plants.sc.egov.usda.gov/characteristics.html>. You need to know some of the plant characteristics in order to use this site, but it has a huge database of plants. Some more-rare plants that don't show up on the other websites are found in this database.

If you want to try a phone app, the smart phone app "Plant Snap" is the best app I've tried. This one seems to have the most plants in the app database. The app description claims it has more than 90 million images to identify a plant. Some of the other apps I've tried have a limited number of trees that can be identified, all of which I could already identify, so I didn't find them helpful. The phone apps are nice because you don't have to know the botanical terminology to describe the leaf or stem; you just upload a photo of the plant in question.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.