**Common name:** Himalayan Coralberry   
**Botanical name:** *Ardisia macrocarpa*    **Family:** *Myrsinaceae* (Myrsine family)

Himalayan Coralberry is a forest plant growing to 1 m tall. Leaves are soomth, narrow lance-shaped, with margins crisped and rounded-toothed. Pink flowers arise on short stalks, in umbels at the end of branches. Flowers have 5 narrow-oblong sepals, and lance-shaped pointed petals, 5 mm long. Berries are bright glossy red, round, depressed at the tip. Himalayan Coralberry is found in the Himalayas, from Uttarakhand to Sikkim, at altitudes of 1500-2400 m. Flowering: April-July.

**Identification credit:** Nongthombam Ullysess

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| Photographed in Gangtok, Sikkim |

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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | **Coralberry, Indian currant**  Family: Caprifoliaceae (Honeysuckle family) Genus: *Symphoricarpos* Species: *orbiculatus*  *Image Courtesy* [*Missouri Botanical PlantFinder*](http://www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/Plant.asp?code=F730)  http://whatcom.wsu.edu/ag/homehort/plant/images/coral_berry.jpgThere were many interesting things to see at the recent Northwest Flower & Garden Show, and people were there in droves, notebooks in hand, to record the names of plants that caught their individual fancy. One small shrub tucked into the front border of a featured display garden, right next to a Viburnum tinus ‘Spring Bouquet’, attracted quite a bit of attention. It was leafless, but showed clusters of rose-pink berries along its nicely shaped, bare stems. Alas, it was not labeled and didn’t appear on the plant list for the garden. A small gaggle of visitors gathered around it, and conjecture ensued. Someone suggested it might be a species of *Callicarpa*, and someone else agreed: yes, it was certainly a beautyberry. Pencils scratched against paper. Then a third someone headed to the side of the garden, found another of the small shrubs, and read its label aloud: *Symphoricarpos orbiculatus*.  An Eastern cousin of our common native snowberry, *S. orbiculatus* has been used in gardens in other regions since the 18th century. It is one of the fewer than 20 species of *Symphoricarpos*, and like most of them, hails from North America. (The one international cousin is native to China.). The genus is characterized by those “berries”—they’re actually “drupes”—and the name *Symphoricarpos* derives from the way they tend to be grouped in clusters along the branches. *S. orbiculatus*, known commonly as coralberry or Indian currant, is native to eastern North America, with its range extending as far east as Nebraska and as far south as Mexico. It is particularly widespread in Oklahoma and Texas. Virginia Tech classifies it as a “very common and difficult-to-control weed of pastures, hay fields, and roadsides that is found primarily in the piedmont and mountains of Virginia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky.” Once again, a plant that’s a weed in one region is presented as a gardener’s treasure in another.  *S. orbiculatus* offers small-but-pretty flowers in summer and grayish green leaves that are a trifle coarse. Its bark is attractive, starting out greenish-brown and aging to a nice reddish-brown with finely shredded peelings that add visual interest. You can expect this shrub to stay less than four feet tall and have an arching habit; but remember it is in the same family as *Abelia, Kolkwitzia, Lonicera, Viburnum*, and *Weigela*. Know it will be twiggy and can spread by underground stems into a thicket if it’s grown in a place it likes. The tidy examples at the show were very young and, I suspect, carefully groomed to remove dead leaves and pruned to retain a sparse look and an open form that the one growing in your garden won’t have unless you shape it regularly and severely.  The berries always start out white and deepen in color as they age through the fall, although they’re likely to be paler in color on a *S. orbiculatus* grown in a Pacific Northwest garden than on one grown in its native range. They tend to be pink here, instead of the deep purplish red they display in the East. Our own native pests haven’t developed a taste for it yet; although if other members of its family are under assault, you can expect coralberry to be victimized, too. It seems to be prone to powdery mildew in late summer when grown in the garden here, just like its snowberry cousin, although immune to it when grown in the wild. *S. orbiculatus* does well in sun or light shade, prefers soil on the alkaline side—a reminder of its non-native status—and its drought tolerance is rated as “medium.”  *S. orbiculatus* is noted in many sources as attractive to birds but if so, why do those berries hang on all winter? Their color is a nice touch in the garden, but they also contain saponin, a natural detergent that is one of the many good-news/bad-news items of the plant kingdom. Digitalis is a form of saponin, for example, used on the one hand to treat heart disease and on the other as a poison lethal enough to tip arrows and spears used in hunting. We know not to nibble on foxglove. We also know deer won’t eat our snowberries, although bears are said to be fond of them. Suffice it to say that *S. orbiculatus* berries and leaves are mildly toxic in small quantities and can cause digestive upset in humans and small mammals. Coralberry also is reported to cause mild sedation, which might explain its use by indigenous people as a treatment for eye pain. Its dried roots, dubbed Devil’s Shoestrings, were used by some Eastern North American tribes to stun fish for collecting and eating.  Coralberry is hardy to USDA Zone 3, so it will withstand any temperature dips it encounters here. Given that, and given those attractive berries, why am I presenting this plant with more caveats and disclaimers than enthusiasm? Because plants seen in arranged settings at garden shows are not always what they seem. One very attractive attribute might be highlighted—in this case, stunning berries to brighten a winter garden. But it’s important to remember that shrubs in our home landscapes are with us year-round. They’re permanent, long-term residents. It’s wise to consider how they look in all seasons, what work they require, and how suited they are to Pacific Northwest growing conditions before we buy them, bring them home, and add them to our landscape. Suitability and good looks aren’t defined by berries alone, even pink ones in the winter. And they’re not always defined by what we see at garden shows, where—dare I say it—a certain amount of artifice is involved. Shows are fun to go to and they offer us good ideas; but we owe it to our gardens and the public to do our research before we accept the premise that any particular plant is truly well suited for growing here in the Pacific Northwest. | | | [Return to Plant of the Month](http://whatcom.wsu.edu/ag/homehort/plant.htm)  [WSU Logo](http://whatcom.wsu.edu/) | |