

Buckthorn Growing Guide

to attract the Brimstone butterfly to your garden



Planting

When you first receive your Buckthorn whip you may feel a bit disappointed. It looks like a thin grey stick, right? Don't worry - treat it right and you will soon have a fine plant providing a living for butterflies, bees and birds. First things first though: make sure the bare roots do not dry out. It can be stored for a few days with the roots wrapped in a plastic bag and kept in a cool place. If you need to keep it longer before planting in its final spot then it should be "heeled in". All that means is cover the roots in soil.

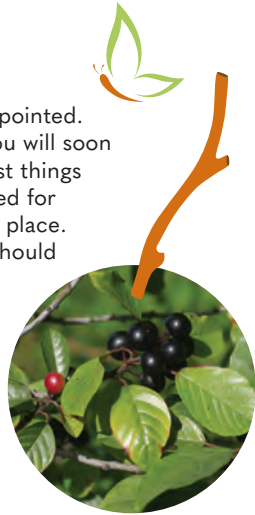
In order to plant your Buckthorn you will need:

Essentials

A spade

Non-essentials

Bone meal, mulch



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If you don't have any bare earth don't worry. Buckthorn will grow in a container. Don't start with a large container; instead pot up the plant in stages, finishing with a minimum final container size of about 45cm (18in). Think about the weight of the container if you plan on moving it. Trees in containers will dry out far more quickly than those growing in the ground and will need regular watering. Keep the compost moist, but not wet, at all times, even during winter when compost can dry out quickly in wind. As it grows prune your buckthorn to the desired size - bear in mind the size of a tree is usually proportional to the size of its root system. Please use peat-free compost. It is just as good but will save irreplaceable natural habitat.

In the spring your whip will come to life. Leaves will appear and small branches start to grow. You may even get some eggs laid by a passing Brimstone or Holly Blue. In the next few years your whip will develop into a fine small tree. If left it will reach a maximum height of around 20 feet, but if it's not growing in the shape you want, or is getting too big, just prune as desired. It can be grown as part of a well-trimmed hedge and so long as you don't cut it between May-July it can still support Brimstone caterpillars. It won't have as many flowers so it won't be as good for bees though.

How to find your Brimstone caterpillars



If you see a pale lemon butterfly fluttering around your Buckthorn in late April, anytime in May, and even in early June, it will be a female Brimstone come to lay eggs. She lays them on the underside of newly emerging leaves. Sometimes, if it is very early in the spring and none have opened, she will lay on a bud. They look like tiny rugby-balls. Once you have seen a few you can find them because you will know what you are looking for and where to find them.

The caterpillars when they first emerge from the egg are small and green. Finding small green things on green leaves is difficult. Deliberately so, as there are many creatures who like to eat caterpillars, so they wouldn't last long if they were easy to find. Fortunately, the Brimstone caterpillars leave clues that tell you where to look.

When they first emerge from their egg they feed on the youngest leaves, eating small holes in the leaf. As the leaf grows, these patches are stretched into larger holes and the leaf looks like "swiss cheese". These holey leaves are quite easy to spot and the caterpillar can then be found lying along the centre of the leaf, as shown in the photograph. If it's not on the holey leaf, examine those around it in case it has wandered to another. Sometimes no caterpillar can be found, even though it has obviously been there. It's probably been eaten - most of them are. But don't be upset - lots of birds need live food for their chicks and the drop in insect numbers has meant fewer chicks surviving (which means less birds). So it's gone to a good cause. As they get bigger the whole leaf gets eaten - except the central rib - so again this distinctive feeding damage can be used to home in on them.

Caterpillar pets



The caterpillars are happy to be kept inside. Most plastic or glass containers will do but it is important the container is at least 5cm deep to give enough room for the butterfly to emerge from its chrysalis later on. It is important to clean the container out and provide fresh leaves every day. The leaves quickly become dry and inedible. Because of this don't bring eggs and the smallest caterpillars in - they need to be mobile enough to move to fresh leaves.

When the caterpillar has grown to full size and is ready to turn into a chrysalis it will stop eating and begin to wander around the container. You don't need to put a stick in for them to hang themselves from - quite often if you do, they will ignore it and hang themselves from the lid or side of the container anyway. They will remain a chrysalis for about two weeks. Just before the butterfly is ready to emerge the chrysalis becomes transparent and the colours of the butterfly inside show through. Once it emerges it will inflate its wings and hang from the chrysalis while they harden. This is why the container needs to have enough space for the butterfly to hang with its wings unfurled. 24 hours after emergence it will be safe to release your Brimstone.

Not just Brimstones



It's not just Brimstone caterpillars that eat buckthorn. The Holly Blue caterpillar eats the flower buds and then as it gets bigger the developing berries. The caterpillars of the moths The Tissue, Pale Brindled Beauty and Willow Beauty also eat Buckthorn leaves

Bees love the tiny pale green flowers. In May, June and July your Buckthorn will hum with their activity. Try sticking your head amongst the branches to get a surround-sound experience and a good view of just how busy they are. Don't be afraid :) - they won't feel threatened and are concentrating on collecting the nectar they need.

In the autumn your Buckthorn will be covered in dark berries. These are great food for birds. Don't try eating them though - they were used in the past as a purgative (they make you sick!). Keep an eye out for Buckthorn seedlings growing around your bush. Or you could have a go at growing some yourself from seeds from the berries. Buckthorn can also be propagated from cuttings. Buckthorn is deciduous, so it will drop its leaves in the winter. This is a good time to do any pruning if you need to.



Brimstone butterfly



Tree bumblebee on Buckthorn



Holly blue butterfly

When your Brimstone does appear you could join the thousands of people who use the iRecord Butterflies app and add it to the millions of butterfly records already collected. This will help us to see how successful we are being at creating our Butterfly City.

It works on Android and Apple phones, is available from their app stores and is really easy to use. You can use it to record any other butterflies you see too. It even has an i.d. section to help with unfamiliar ones.

For further information, news, or to get in touch, visit our website: pattfoundation.org/butterfly-city



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