

Scientific Name: *Ruscus aculeatus* 'Wheeler's Variety'

The origin of the name *Ruscus* is unclear. It may be the name used by Virgil for the plant, or it could be derived from the Anglo-Saxon word for holly or boxwood. The specific epithet *aculeatus* means prickly or thorny in Latin.

Family: Asparagaceae. In 2003, new genetic research expanded this family from just a few genera to around 140 genera and thousands of species, including those formerly in families such as Agavaceae and Hyacinthaceae. *Ruscus* itself was previously placed in Liliaceae, then in its own family, Ruscaceae, before it finally moved to Asparagaceae.

Common Name: Butcher's Broom (named because it is supposedly useful for cleaning a butcher's block); Box Holly.

Native Habitat: Woodlands, hedgerows and coastal cliffs from the Mediterranean and Black Sea to Great Britain.

Hardiness Zone: Zone 7.

Exposure: Partial to deep shade.

Form: Densely branched, rhizomatous, evergreen shrub.

Soil Requirements: Tolerant of a very wide range of soil types and pH conditions; drought tolerant.

Growth Rate: Slow-growing, can take 20 years to reach its full height, but can spread by rhizomes to form dense stands.

Height: Up to three feet.

Leaves: What appear to be leaves on *Ruscus aculeatus* 'Wheeler's Variety' are actually cladophylls, or cladodes. Cladophylls are flattened segments of the stem that are specialized for photosynthesis, similar to cactus pads. The true leaves are very fine, small, and have been reduced to membranous scales. The cladophylls are crowded in an alternate pattern on each branch and are dark green and glossy, each with a spine at the apex.

Flower: The flowers of *Ruscus aculeatus* 'Wheeler's Variety' are small, with petals and sepals in parts of three, and green-white with purple petal bases. They are unique in the way that they emerge from the center of the leaf-like cladophylls. The straight species, *Ruscus aculeatus*, is dioecious, and will not produce fruit without both male and female plants present. *Ruscus aculeatus* 'Wheeler's Variety,' however, is a hermaphrodite form, meaning that its flowers contain both male and female parts, and will reliably produce fruit on its own.

Fruit: The fruit is a bright red, spherical berry that rests in the center of the cladophylls on female plants, giving a nice contrast of bright red to the dark green foliage.

The *Ruscus aculeatus* 'Wheeler's Variety' at Stonecrop spends its winters in a large pot in our temperate Conservatory, where the night low falls between 38 and 45 degrees Fahrenheit. We have enjoyed the prolific fruiting of this *Ruscus* every winter for nearly 20 years, since we first acquired it from Plant Delights Nursery in North Carolina.



Ruscus aculeatus 'Wheeler's Variety' in the Conservatory



Spine-tipped cladophylls



Fading flower and new fruit, emerging from the center of each cladophyll