

Black Cherry

Prunus serotina

Common names:

Black Cherry, Rum Cherry, Wild Black Cherry, Cabinet Cherry, Whiskey Cherry

Pronunciation:

PRO-nus ser-OT-i-na

Family:

Rosaceae

Genus:

Prunus

"In the forest this, the tallest of all Cherries and the most precious cabinet wood in the rose family, may rise to a noble 100 feet in height....In the days when our woods were rich with such fine old Cherry trees, the Appalachian pioneers invented a drink call cherry bounce; juice pressed from the berries was infused in brandy or rum to make a cordial which, though bitter, was in high favor among old-time mountaineers."

"It is related that the immortal Daniel Boone made himself several Cherry caskets, and used occasionally to sleep in them in his old age, but gave up all but his last to needy corpses."

(excerpts from Donald Culross Peattie, A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America)

Quick ID Tips

- Scaly dark bark on mature black cherry trees resembles potato chips glued onto the trunk
- Twigs have faint almond-like odor when scratched
- Large, black, corrugated masses on trunk and branches (the Black Knot of *Prunus* fungus)
- Very common and widespread in open woods, old fields, and hedgerows

Details

- Broadleaf deciduous tree that grows to 50-70 ft. Its shape is tall, pyramidal to conical when young. With age, oval with pendulous branches (i.e., somewhat weeping) predominate.
- Bark on large trunks is gray-black and smooth on young trees. The bark on older trees is scaly, almost like potato chips were glued to the trunk.
- The inner bark and twigs are aromatic when scratched due to cyanide compounds that have an almond-like odor.

- Leaves are alternate, simple, 3-4" long and narrow, oblong-ovate to lance-ovate. Leaf tip is acuminate, leaf margins are serrulate with small teeth. The leaf is glossy dark green above, light green below, with yellow to red leaves in fall.
- Flowers are white, 1/2" wide, in long 4-5" clusters (racemes).
- The cherry fruit, 1/2" diameter and round, turns black in early fall. Wild black cherries, like most berries, are high in vitamins and antioxidants and have a somewhat sweet but astringent flavor. The berries also are commonly used in jams, sauces, and reductions.
- The cherries are eagerly eaten by many birds, who spread the seeds widely via defecation. Some seeds however may remain in the soil bank and not germinate for as long as three years. All *Prunus* species have hard seeds that benefit from scarification to germinate, which in nature is produced by passing through an animal's digestive tract.
- Prefers full sun.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 3-9. Native range extends from Ontario east to North Dakota and south to Texas and Florida; separate populations are found in Arizona, New Mexico, and in the mountains of Mexico and Guatemala. It has escaped from cultivation as an ornamental tree in Europe and is now naturalized in some areas.
- The eastern tent caterpillar defoliates entire groves in some springs.
- **Caution:** The twigs and leaves of the black cherry contain cyanide compounds (the edible cherries do not). The foliage, particularly when wilted, converts these compounds to hydrogen cyanide (prussic acid). Farmers are strongly advised to remove any trees that fall in a field containing livestock because the wilted leaves could poison the animals. Removal is not always practical, though, because black cherry trees often grow in very large numbers on farms, taking advantage of the light brought about by mowing and grazing. Entire fencerows can be lined with this tree, making it difficult to monitor all the branches falling into the grazing area.

(Source: Wikipedia)



leaves



flower cluster



cherry cluster



young bark



older bark



eastern tent caterpillar on black cherry

Source:

- Oregon State University Landscape Plants,
<https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/plants/prunus-serotina>
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)