

North Carolina
Extension Gardener
 Plant Toolbox

Prunus serotina

Common Name(s): Black Cherry; Wild Cherry; Wild Rum Cherry.

Phonetic Spelling

PROO-nus seh-roh-TEE-nuh

⚠ This plant has high severity poison characteristics.

[See below](#)

Description

Black Cherry is a deciduous tree that may grow 60 to 80 feet tall and is found in all parts of NC but grows best in the mountains. The tree has alternate leaves with a finely toothed margin, inconspicuous glands on the stem, and yellow-brown pubescence on the underside of the leaf. The bark of the tree is marked by horizontal lenticels. As the tree ages, it exhibits a scaly or flaky pattern. In the spring, small, white flowers mature. The tree produces a round, dark purple fruit that matures in late summer.

The bark of mature trees develops a dark scaly or flaky pattern. Bark, roots, and leaves contain concentrations of toxic cyanogenic compounds, hence the noticeable bitter almond aroma of the inner bark.

Prunus serotina can be pruned and kept at shrub size by cutting them to the ground every 2-3 years.

Fire Risk: This plant has a low flammability rating.

Insects, Diseases, or Other Plant Problems: As with most cherries, the black cherry tree it is susceptible to a large number of insect and disease pests. Potential diseases include leaf spot, die back, leaf curl, powdery mildew, root rot, and fireblight. Potential insects include aphids, scale, borers, leafhoppers, caterpillars, tent caterpillars and Japanese beetles. Spider mites may also be trouble.

Poison Delivery Mode: Ingestion

Mountain Ridge Top Garden - East Lawn and Lower Drive Border

Reynolda Palm House and Gardens

Cultivars / Varieties:

'Spring Sparkle', var. serotina



Flowers
 Andreas Rockstein
[CC BY-SA 4.0](#)



Form
Kathleen Moore
[CC BY 2.0](#)



Leaves
Chris Moody
[CC BY-NC 4.0](#)



Fall color
JanetandPhil
[CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)



Form
KM
[CC BY 4.0](#)



Fruit
Lee Anne McConnaughey
[CC BY-SA 4.0](#)



2 glands on petiole
Kathleen Moore
[CC BY 2.0](#)



Leaf arrangement buds
Kathleen Moore
[CC BY 2.0](#)



Lenticles shiny bark
Kathleen Moore
[CC BY 2.0](#)



Bud
Jim Robbins
[CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)

Attributes:**Genus:**

Prunus

Species:

serotina

Family:

Rosaceae

Uses (Ethnobotany):

Native Americans used the inner bark to treat colds. The hard, reddish-brown wood takes a fine polish and is commercially valued for use in a large number of products such as furniture, veneers, cabinets, interior paneling, gun stocks, instrument/tool handles, and musical instruments.

Life Cycle:

Woody

Country Or Region Of Origin:

W. Canada to NW. U.S.A., E. Canada to Guatemala

Distribution:

Arizona north east to Nebraska north to North Dakota northeast to Quebec south throughout the south also found in British Columbia and Washington.

Fire Risk Rating:

low flammability

Wildlife Value:

This plant provides nectar for pollinators and is a larval host plant for several species of butterflies. You may see Coral Hairstreak (*Satyrium titus*) which has one flight from May-August, Eastern Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*), which has three flights from February-November in the deep south and March-September in the north, Spring Azure (*Celastrina ladon*) which has many flights from January-October at the gulf coast getting shorter as you move north, Viceroy (*Limenitis archippus*) which has two to three broods May-September, and Red-spotted Purple (*Limenitis arthemis astyanax*) has two broods from April-

Fruits are bitter but can be used to make jellies and jams.

Dimensions:

Height: 60 ft. 0 in. - 80 ft. 0 in.

Width: 30 ft. 0 in. - 60 ft. 0 in.

Whole Plant Traits:**Plant Type:**

Native Plant

Poisonous

Tree

Woody Plant Leaf Characteristics:

Deciduous

Habit/Form:

Conical

Pyramidal

Growth Rate:

Rapid

Maintenance:

Low

Texture:

Medium

Cultural Conditions:**Light:**

Full sun (6 or more hours of direct sunlight a day)

Soil Texture:

High Organic Matter

Loam (Silt)

Soil Drainage:

Good Drainage

Moist

Occasionally Dry

Available Space To Plant:

more than 60 feet

NC Region:

Coastal

Mountains

Piedmont

USDA Plant Hardiness Zone:

2a, 2b, 3a, 3b, 4b, 4a, 5a, 5b, 6a, 6b, 7a, 7b, 8b, 8a

Fruit:**Fruit Color:**

Black

Gold/Yellow

Red/Burgundy

Fruit Value To Gardener:

Edible

Display/Harvest Time:

Summer

Fruit Type:

Berry

Fruit Length:

< 1 inch

Fruit Width:

< 1 inch

Fruit Description:

3/8 inch purple-black cherries in drooping clusters that ripen in late summer. Bitter tasting off the tree.

Flowers:**Flower Color:**

Pink

White

Flower Inflorescence:

Raceme

Flower Value To Gardener:

Fragrant

Showy

Flower Bloom Time:

Spring

Flower Petals:

4-5 petals/rays

Flower Size:

< 1 inch

Flower Description:

3-6 inches long pendulous racemes of many small fragrant white 5-petaled flowers that appear with the foliage in late April to May.

October. Fruits are eaten by songbirds, wild turkeys, quail, white-tailed deer and small mammals.

Play Value:

Wildlife Food Source

Particularly Resistant To

(Insects/Diseases/Other Problems):

fire in the landscape.

Edibility:**Leaves:****Woody Plant Leaf Characteristics:**

Deciduous

Leaf Color:

Brown/Copper

Gold/Yellow

Green

Leaf Feel:

Soft

Leaf Value To Gardener:

Fragrant

Deciduous Leaf Fall Color:

Gold/Yellow

Orange

Leaf Type:

Simple

Leaf Arrangement:

Alternate

Leaf Shape:

Elliptical

Lanceolate

Oblong

Leaf Margin:

Dentate

Serrate

Hairs Present:

Yes

Leaf Length:

3-6 inches

Leaf Width:

1-3 inches

Leaf Description:

The 3-6 inch long by .75-1.5 inch wide dark green leaves have a cherry fragrance and bitter taste. The leaves are alternate with fine incurvate teeth, inconspicuous glands on the stem and yellow-brown pubescence on the underside of the leaf. The fall color is yellow-orange. The scent when crushed is of bitter almonds.

Bark:**Bark Color:**

Dark Brown

Light Gray

Surface/Attachment:

Lenticels

Papery

Bark Description:

Younger bark is shiny and has verticle lenticels. The bark of mature trees develops a dark scaly or flaky pattern. Inner bark has a bitter almond flavor.

Stem:**Stem Is Aromatic:**

Yes

Stem Description:

Satiny reddish-brown twigs with a strong scent of bitter almonds.

Landscape:**Landscape Location:**

Woodland

Landscape Theme:

Butterfly Garden

Edible Garden

Native Garden

Pollinator Garden

Design Feature:

Flowering Tree

Shade Tree

Attracts:

Butterflies

Pollinators

Songbirds

Resistance To Challenges:

Deer

Fire

Problems:

Frequent Disease Problems

Frequent Insect Problems

Mossy

Poisonous to Humans:**Poison Severity:**

High

Poison Symptoms:

If ingested, it is likely to cause death in humans and livestock and pets. Gasping, weakness, excitement, pupil dilation, spasms, convulsions, coma, respiratory failure. Stems, leaves, seeds contain cyanide, particularly toxic in the process of wilting: brick red mucous membranes, panting, shock.

Poison Toxic Principle:

Hydrocyanic acid, Cyanogenic glycosides

Causes Contact Dermatitis:

No

Poison Part:

Bark

Leaves

Seeds

Stems

ivissy

Poisonous to Humans

Problem for Cats

Problem for Children

Problem for Dogs

Problem for Horses