



Ethnobotanical Leaflets



The Versatile, and Loved Cherry Tree

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People all across the world enjoy cherries for their sweet flavor in pies, candies, and pastries. They have become one of the most widely cultivated fruits in the world. As reported by the Columbia Encyclopedia Online (2000), they can be found in home orchards all across the country. However, the cherry tree has many uses. Some varieties are valued for their beautiful flowers, others for the wood that can be made into high quality furniture. Whatever the variety or use, the cherry tree is an important plant in today's society.

The cherry tree traces its origins back to the east. The earliest signs of cherry trees come from the area around Asia Minor, Persia, and Transcaucasia (www.botany.com, 2000). To this area of the world, the cherry tree has become almost a sacred plant, with many varieties of flowering cherry trees being cultivated into various forms all valued for their flowers. This has become so popular in the east that in Japan they have even instituted a national holiday around the time that the trees begin to blossom (The Columbia Encyclopedia Online, 2000).

Cherry trees were introduced to Europe through both natural processes and human interaction. By 73 BC, the cherry tree had been introduced to most of southern and central Europe with the help of the Romans. Soon after, the plants started to appear in Great Britain, where they were able to flourish (MS Encarta Online, 2000). Now there are species of cherry trees all over the Northern Hemisphere with species and varieties that have adapted so well to the different environments that today you can find varieties of cherry tree in almost any region, from California to Japan, that have developed unique and prized characteristics (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1999).

Cherry trees, like many fruit bearing trees, are members of the rose family. The scientific name for the family is Rosaceae. Cherries are in the genus *Prunus* along with apricots, peaches, and plums (The Columbia Encyclopedia Online, 2000). Cherry trees come in hundreds of varieties, but are derived from only a few species. There are two main species valued for their fruit, a couple of species are known for producing high quality wood or are grown as ornamentals. All species of cherry tree have varieties that are prized for their beautiful and aromatic flowers (www.botany.com, 2000).

One of the cherries that bear edible fruit is known scientifically as *Prunus avium*. *P. avium* is the source of sweet cherries. Sweet cherries are the most popular of the edible cherries. The fruits can range in color from dark red to a light yellow. They do not stand up to cooking well, so most sweet cherries are eaten fresh. The sweet cherry tree itself is a medium sized tree that can be grown in slightly more varied climates than the sour species. It is a bit trickier to grow, however, due to the fact that it usually requires cross-pollination in order to produce a significant amount of fruit. However, many varieties of sweet cherries have been cultivated not for their fruit but for their flowers. These varieties can have different colored flowers ranging from white to pink (www.botany.com, 2000).

Another variety of edible cherry is the sour cherry, or *Prunus cerasus*. This species is much tougher than its sweet cousin. The tree is easier to grow due to its ability to self-pollinate. *P. cerasus* is in general a smaller tree than *P. avium*. The fruit of the sour cherry is also more variable in that it can be cooked so it is often used in pies, jams, tarts, and other preserves. Also, if it is allowed to ripen on the tree, it eventually becomes sweet and can be enjoyed fresh just as in the case of *P. avium* (www.botany.com, 2000).

Another use for the cherry tree is in the production of wood. The wood of the cherry tree is particularly good for use in cabinet making due to its fine grain and beautiful color. Two species that are well known for high quality wood are the previously discussed *P. avium* and the black or rum cherry *P. serotina*. Both are known for their red color, while the black cherry is often sought out for its ability to take a high polish (Columbia Encyclopedia Online, 2000). The black cherry is found mostly in North America, particularly in the United States and Canada. Due to the silky luster of its heartwood, black cherry is often used in high quality furniture in addition to cabinets (Compton Encyclopedia, 1998). In addition to its great color and texture, most cherry wood produces a characteristic aroma, which is often considered desirable in certain types of cabinets (Columbia Encyclopedia Online, 2000).

A final use for the cherry tree is as a decorative plant in gardens and orchards. All varieties of cherry tree have beautiful flowers ranging from white to shades of pink. Also, they not only produce lovely flowers but the foliage and fruits of these trees can come in a wide array of colors. Finally, they can range in size from 50-foot tall trees down to small bushes or shrubs (MS Encarta Online, 2000). Some of the more popular species of flowering cherry trees are the sweet and sour cherry trees mentioned earlier, the small *P. cistena*, commonly known as the purple-leaf sand cherry, and *P. laurocerasus*, the cherry laurel. What separates many of these flowering species from the sweet and sour species is that the fruit is not edible. The laurel species is an entirely decorative plant and its fruits can actually be harmful if eaten (www.botany.com).

The cherry tree is a unique and versatile plant. Its fruit is often delicious, its wood can be beautiful and elegant, and its flowers are a wonder to behold in the spring. This plant has been able to traverse the globe and has adapted itself to a wide variety of regions and purposes. Which is why today it must be recognized that the cherry tree is a truly wondrous plant that has enriched and beautified the life of mankind.

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