

Prunus americana

[Synonyms : *Prunus palmeri*]

WILD PLUM is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to central and eastern North America it has small fragrant, white flowers.

It is also known as American plum, American red plum, American wild plum, Apricot, August plum, Goose plum, Hog plum, *Kade* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), *Kantsh* (Winnebago North American Indian), *Kate* (Dakota North American Indian), *Niwaharit* (Pawnee North American Indian), Red plum, River plum, Sloe, Sloe plum, Thorn plum, Wild red plum, Wild yellow plum, and Yellow plum; and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of fidelity (blossom), independence, and ‘keep your promises’.

Americana means ‘of or from America (North or South)’.

The native North American plum was well-known to many Indian tribes for many of whom it provided a source of food and medicine. The fruit were eaten fresh (by the Meskwaki, Pawnee, Ponca, Isleta, Crow, Cherokee, Omaha, Kiowa, Chippewa, Winnebago and Dakota) and cooked as a sauce (by the Pawnee, Winnebago Dakota, Ponca, Iroquois and Omaha). They were also dried for Winter supplies or later hunting expeditions by the Kiowa, Chippewa, Crow, Winnebago, Dakota, some of the Apache, the Cheyenne, Pawnee, Ponca and Omaha. Fruit were made into a preserve by the Cherokee, into puddings and delicacies by the Cheyenne, and soup by some of the Chippewa. Meskwaki Indians used the raw fruit to make a butter and some of the Dakota dried them for emergency rations. The fruit juice was drunk by the Cherokee, and the Iroquois dried and boiled the wild plums to produce a kind of coffee.

The Kiowa tribe harvested the small red (occasionally yellow) fruit for food but appear not to have seen any medicinal virtue in the plant. On the other hand both the Omaha and Meskwaki tribes are believed to have collected the bark for medicinal use. The former (and the Chippewa tribe) used it to heal cuts, and the Meskwaki believed it to be a remedy for oral canker sores. Authorities note that it was used medicinally by the Rappahannock, and the Cherokee prescribed it for treating kidney and urinary ailments as well as coughs. In the Cheyenne tribe some oral problems were healed with pulped fruit, and the Chippewa used the root as an ingredient in a potion taken to get rid of worms. Some of the Chippewa also used wild plum to ease diarrhoea, and the Mohican Indians employed a twig infusion as a remedy for asthma.

Some of the tribes such as the Pawnee, Dakota, Winnebago, Ponca and Omaha made pliant brooms by binding together tough plum twigs.

For the Teton Sioux young growth on the plum trees meant material for prayer sticks. It was picked and painted and offerings (such as tobacco) were attached to its top for use in religious rituals. The Cheyenne tribe also used branches of wild plum during their Sun Dance ceremonials.

Like the witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) the Mohican Indians used a forked stick from this tree to divine water.

The flowering of the wild plum became a seasonal indicator for tribes such as the Omaha who watched for this for planting beans, squashes (*Cucurbita*) or corn (*Zea*).

In the Dakota tribe the seeds served as ‘men’ in one of their dice games.

The fruit is used today for making preserves.

These plums are yet another recipient of the Hoosier Poet's attentions. He seems to have been well familiar with them in Indiana as James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916) refers to the fruit in his poem entitled *Armazindy*.

..... Jes' gorges o' wild plums,
Till a feller'd suck his thumbs
Clean up to his elbows! My! –
Me some more er lem me die: