

*Prunus avium*

[Synonyms : *Cerasus avium*, *Cerasus nigra*, *Prunus cerasus* var. *avium*]

**CHERRY** is a deciduous tree. Native to western Asia, to Europe and North America it has clusters of small white flowers.

It is also known as Bird cherry, Brandy mazzard, *Ceiriosen Ddu* (Welsh), *Ceredeira* (Portuguese), *Cerejeira* (Portuguese), *Čerešňa vtácia* (Slovak), *Cereza* (Spanish), *Cerezo de monte* (Spanish), *Cerise* (French), *Cerise douce* (French), *Cerisier de France* (French-Canadian), *Cerisier des oiseaux* (French), Cherry blossom, *Ciliegio* (Italian), *Ciliegio visciolo* (Italian), *Ciregiolo* (Italian), Common wild cherry, Crab-cherry, *Czeresnia ptasia* (Polish), *Fågelbär* (Swedish), *Fågelkörsbär* (Swedish), Flowering cherry, Gaskin, Gean, *Gilas* (Kashmiri), *Guignes* (French), Hagberry, Hawkberry, Heart cherry, Hegberry, *Imeläkirsikka* (Finnish), *Karaz barrî* (Arabic), *Kers* (Dutch), *Kirschbaum* (German), *Kirsche* (German), *Kirsikka* (Finnish), *Körsbär* (Swedish), *Linnun kirsikka* (Finnish), Mazzard, Mazzard cherry, *Merisier* (French), *Merisier des bois* (French), Merry, *Morrino* (Spanish), *Outou* (Japanese), *Prunuso birda* (Esperanto), *Sødkirsebaer* (Danish), *Seiyou mizakura* (Japanese), *Sötkörs* (Swedish), *Sötkörsbär* (Swedish), *Süsskirsche* (German), Sweet cherry, *Tian guo ying tao* (Chinese), *Tian ying tao* (Chinese), *Třešň ptačí* (Czech), *Vildkörsbär* (Swedish), *Vogelkirsche* (German), Wild cherry, *Wild-Kirsche* (German), and *Zoete kers* (Dutch); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of deception (white cherry tree), ‘do me justice’, good education (tree), Great Divine spirit, merrymaking (fruit), spiritual beauty, truth, and virginity (fruit).

The wild red-streaked or red-purple berries are smaller than cultivated varieties. Although the fruit of the uncultivated cherry are quite sweet, the many varieties developed from it and grown as table cherries are far sweeter. Ornamental cherries have also been developed.

A small incision is made in the bark and the reddish-brown aromatic resin is collected as it oozes out. This can be crystallized.

Warning – kernels (stones) are poisonous and must not be taken internally. They can cause a short period of rapid breathing, collapse and death.

*Avium* is derived from Latin *avis* (bird) meaning ‘of birds’.

The fruit are a delicacy in the bird world.

Cherry is one of the three sweetest fruit known the other two being the fig (*Ficus carica*) and the grape (*Vitis vinifera*).

The tree was growing in temperate areas on the Continents in the northern hemisphere in prehistoric times. Cherries were picked in northern Europe at least 3000 years ago (before wine was available in the region) when Neolithic Europeans drank the juice squeezed out of the fruit. The fruit were familiar to the ancient Greeks and were mentioned by the Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC). For centuries cherries were one of the delicacies enjoyed by poorer people in what is now northern China. While in Syria by the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries in the early days of Islam cherry orchards were a common sight.

A case could be attempted to show that the cherry tree is ‘fiction’-prone. There are two stories in particular that in time have proved to be wrong and they offer an example of how easily plant origins (and other related material) can be distorted by unquering reliance on the written word. First there is the alleged and subsequently oft reported claim by the

1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79), that the cherry was introduced to Italy by a homeward bound Roman soldier (and gourmet) Lucius Licinius Lucullus (c.110-57 BC) in the middle of the last Century BC. Authorities note that this has proved to be incorrect in the light of more recent research – although it is possible that Lucullus brought a new variety home with him. Then there is the traditional story about George Washington (1732-1799), the first American President, felling his father’s cherry tree – a story again perpetuated by others in good faith. This has also proved to be a fallacy. Apparently it was originally dreamed up for inclusion in an early American biography (written by a Parson Weems) that included alleged anecdotes relating to the great man.

Several old British sayings and traditions about the cherry are tied in with the cuckoo. It was said that the cuckoo could only stop singing when it had taken three good meals of cherries. Children would shake a flowering tree and ask

Cuckoo, cherry tree  
Good bird tell me  
How many years before I die

and listen for the reply given by the number of bird-calls. It was also tradition to turn over money with the words

Cuckoo, cherry tree  
Catch a penny and give it to me.

upon hearing the first cuckoo of the year. Then there is a proverb which dates back to 1678 that runs

A cherry year, a merry year; a plum year, a dumb year.

However apart from the implied reference to the amount of blossom generated in any one year nobody seems to be able to provide a full explanation for this rhyme.

The cherry has not escaped superstitious associations. There are some in Britain even today who believe it is unlucky to include the flowers in wedding bouquets.

A Christian legend relates how Jesus chided St. Peter for despising small things as He gave him a cherry. In Christian tradition the fruit symbolizes ‘delight of the blessed’ and ‘the fruit of paradise’.

The famous English playwright, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), makes several references to cherry in his plays. For instance in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Helena says

..... So we grew together,  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet an union in partition;  
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem: .....

Another Englishman of the same period, Thomas Campion (1567-1620) who was an unusual combination of physician, poet and composer, wrote a poem entitled *Cherry-Ripe* which begins

There is a garden in her face  
Where roses and white lilies blow;  
A heavenly paradise is that place,  
Wherein all pleasant fruits do grow;  
There cherries grow that none may buy,  
Till Cherry-Ripe themselves do cry.

In Britain as in other countries excuses for fairs used to be welcomed as an opportunity to meet friends and sell an abundance of local produce – particularly when shops were less accessible than now. One such which still carries on today is the Black Cherry Fair at Chertsey in Surrey held on the second Saturday in July. At one time cherries on the branch were also peddled on London streets.

Cherries are eaten raw and cooked in puddings, jellies and ice cream. They are also preserved, made into jams and also used as sweet flavouring in cakes and biscuits. Their domestic versatility is reflected on a commercial scale and the fruit are also an ingredient in soft drinks and in the manufacture of liqueurs eg. maraschino, kirsch.

The wood has been used in the past for decorative veneers. Until man-made materials were adopted it was sometimes chosen for work on the inside of carriages on British railway trains. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it is especially valued by for furniture and by precision instrument-makers.

Medicinally, gum from the tree (dissolved in wine) was once used not just as a treatment for coughs and sore throats but also to encourage appetite and improve eyesight. An infusion of the stalks used also to be recommended by European herbalists as a tonic and the bark provided a treatment for fever.