

*Prunus emarginata*

[Synonyms : *Cerasus emarginata*, *Prunus emarginata* var. *villosa*]

**BITTER CHERRY** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western Canada it has tiny fragrant white flowers with many stamens.

It is also known as Wild cherry.

*Emarginata* means ‘with a shallowly notched tip’.

The tiny, very bitter-tasting, nearly black fruit were eaten by a few North American Indian tribes including the Klamath and Shuswap. Both the Thompson and Coeur d’Alene ate them occasionally, whereas the Cahuilla Indians enjoyed them as a sought after delicacy. The Quileute and Hoh Indians made the berries into preserves.

Both the Haisla and Hanaksiala Indians used the wood for carving, and the Klamath tribe cut the branches to make whips. Some of the Salish Indians collected the wood for fuel.

Bitter cherry’s bark seems to have been particularly valuable. The Thompson and Klallam Indians made cordage from it. It was used particularly by the former for mending and strengthening old suspension bridges while the Klallam used it for fishing lines. Several tribes including the Nitinaht, Quinault, Bella Coola, Hesquiat and Thompson found the bark invaluable for fastening or wrapping objects, and it was used by both the Okanagan-Colville and Thompson tribes for decorating their bows – as well as pipe stems used by the former. These latter two tribes also used the bark to make bags. For many tribes including the Snohomish, Thompson, some of the Okanagan-Colville, the Bella Coola, Hesquiat, Shuswap, Salish, Nitinaht and Hanaksiala however bitter cherry’s bark seems to have come into its own by providing reddish-coloured material for basketry. (In addition the Thompson and some of the Okanagan-Colville made matting from it.).

The reed in the Nitinaht tribe’s ceremonial wolf whistles was made from bitter cherry bark, and Kwakiutl children would be seen wearing the plant as part of a charm to repel disease.

Some of bitter cherry’s medicinal qualities were harnessed by quite a few North American Indian tribes including the Thompson. It provided a laxative for the Makah, Quinault and Okanagan-Colville Indians. The bark was used as splints by the Thompson tribe, and as a poultice covering by the Kwakiutl. The Saanich, Makah, Nitinaht and Cowichan Indian tribes all took it as a tonic. Kwakiutl Indians applied it externally for treating cancer, valued it as a remedy for some female disorders, and used it in remedies for oral problems and skin ailments in both adults and children. It was used by the Lummi during childbirth, and it also offered a contraceptive for the Skokomish, Lummi, Quinault and Skagit Indian tribes. Bitter cherry was turned to for treating heart problems and tuberculosis by the Bella Coola and Kwakiutl tribes, it provided a Paiute treatment for eye disorders, and it was used by the Hoh, Makah and Quileute Indians in remedies for blood diseases. Not least the Cowichan, Skagit, Skokomish and Saanich tribes all used it to ease colds.

Despite a disagreeable bitter flavour records indicate that locally the fruit have been made into jam.

Bitter cherry is held to be one of the most important food sources for local wildlife. Apparently deer, elk, moose, black bears, and rabbits all browse on the twigs, foliage and bark.

Naturalists also note that gamebirds and songbirds swallow the fruit whole and then

proceed to distribute both fruit and seed. Where fruit have fallen to the ground they are often enjoyed by chipmunks, mountain beavers, deer-mice – and slugs. Among livestock sheep are said to be especially partial to the fruit and cattle will also eat them.

The plant has proved to be valuable in the initial stages of rehabilitating some mining areas. It has also been used for land reclamation more generally and as a stabilising agent to counter soil erosion. Apart from environmental considerations it has been planted as an ornamental plant.