

Prunus serotina

[Synonyms : *Cerasus serotina*, *Padus serotina*, *Padus virginiana*, *Prunus capuli*]

WILD CHERRY is a deciduous tree. Native to eastern North America it has tiny slightly fragrant, white-pink flowers.

It is also known as American bird cherry, American black cherry, American cherry, *Amerikaanse vogelkers* (Dutch), *Amerikan cherii* (Japanese), *Amerikanische Spätkirsche* (German), *Amerikanische Traubenkirsche* (German), *Amerikansk kirsebaertrae* (Danish), *Amerikanskt Körsbärsträd* (Swedish), Bird cherry, Black cherry, Black choke, Black wild cherry, Cabinet cherry, Capulin, *Cerezo americano* (Spanish), *Cerezo negro* (Spanish), *Cerezo negro silvestre* (Spanish), *Cerise noire* (French), Choke-cherry, *Ciliegio americano* (Italian), *Glansbladet haeg* (Danish), *Glanshägg* (Swedish), *Kiiltotuomi* (Finnish), Mahogany, *Merisier d'Amérique* (French), Plum cherry, Rum cherry, *Spaetbluehende Traubenkirsche* (German), *Späte Traubenkirsche* (German), *Střemcha pozdní* (Czech), *Syystuomi* (German), Virginian prune, *Vogelkirschbaum* (German), Whisky cherry, Whiskey cherry, Wild black cherry, Wild cherry bark, and Wild rum cherry.

Warning – all parts are poisonous including bark, leaves (particularly when wilted), fruit and kernels. The fruit flesh can cause tongue blisters, flushed cheeks and increased pulse rate. The kernels can cause a short period of rapid breathing, loss of voice, spasms, collapse and death.

Wild cherry can be extremely invasive when introduced outside its native habitat.

Serotina is derived from Latin *serotini*- (late) component meaning 'late in flowering or ripening'.

Local North American Indian tribes including the Chippewa, Menominee, Cherokee and Potawatomi ate the small fresh, glossy purple-black berries. (If the fruit were picked and left to stand for a while it was said (especially by the Menominee) that they would make them drunk.) An alcoholic drink was made from them by the Iroquois Indians, whereas the Chippewa made a tea from the twigs. The Iroquois also used the cherries to make a sauce, some of the Chippewa Indians made them into a soup, and the Mahuna tribe relied on them as a thirst quencher. Both the Iroquois and Chippewa tribes dried and stored the fruit for future use such as when out hunting or for Winter food. Cherokee Indians used the strong wood for carving, making furniture and construction.

Some of the tribes used the fruit medicinally. Potawatomi Indians flavoured medicines with it and the Rappahannock used it to enhance appetite. It was a Micmac remedy for smallpox and the Cherokee prescribed it for measles. Among the Delaware, Iroquois, Cherokee, some of the Chippewa, the Rappahannock, Malecite, Mahuna and Penobscot tribes wild cherry offered a cough medicine, and the Narraganset, Shinnecock, Rappahannock, Micmac, Mohican, Iroquois, some of the Chippewa and the Malecite Indians all used it to ease colds. For some of the Chippewa tribe and also the Iroquois it provided a treatment for general lung ailments, and the Iroquois prescribed it for bronchitis. They and the Malecite, Micmac and Chippewa tribes all used it to treat tuberculosis. Mohican Indians included it in remedies for dysentery, the Delaware took it for diarrhoea, and the Shinnecock, Mohican and Cherokee tribes found it helpful for treating some stomach

upsets. Wild cherry could be used by both the Iroquois tribe and some of the Delaware to treat various female problems, and the Cherokee used it during childbirth. Fever was eased with it by the Iroquois and Cherokee Indians and it was also one of their remedies for blood diseases (and for sore throats). Iroquois Indians used it to treat some liver problems, headaches and venereal disease – and they also used it as a stimulant and to cause vomiting when this was necessary. Both the Chippewa and Cherokee tribes applied it for skin problems, the Chippewa and Iroquois Indians are said to have used it for healing burns and wounds, and the Chippewa also turned to it for worms. Not least it was taken as a tonic by the Penobscot, Delaware, Mohican, Rappahannock and Micmac tribes.

North Americans used to take a ‘cherry bounce’ made from wild cherry in rum or brandy as a tonic. An extract of the bark was also used as a drink flavouring. Today the fruit are used by the drinks industry in making liqueurs (and as flavouring for rum and brandy). Far more often than not apparently the fruit are small, hard and of poor taste, However when juicy fruit can be found they are also popular cooked in sweetened puddings and sauces.

Although this lightweight and hard, light brown wood was once used to make such items as tool handles it was particularly prized for furniture and home interiors – not only because many believe its colour compares well with that of West Indian sandalwood (*Amyris balsamifera*) or mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*) but also because it ages well (the colour softens and deepens). It has also been used for making parts of musical instruments, mathematical instruments, printing and engraving blocks, tool handles, wooden ware and toys.

Medicinally, the bark has been used for centuries primarily to treat respiratory disorders such as bronchitis, catarrh, tuberculosis and whooping-cough.