

Prunus virginiana

[Synonyms : *Cerasus virginiana*, *Padus rubra*, *Padus virginiana*, *Prunus melanocarpa*, *Prunus nana*, *Prunus rubra*]

CHOKE CHERRY is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to eastern North America it has tiny slightly fragrant, white flowers.

It is also known as American wild cherry, *Cerezo de Virginia* (Spanish), *Cerisier de Virginie* (French), Common chokecherry, Rocky Mountain cherry, *Střemcha viržinská* (Czech), *Virginiahägg* (Swedish), Virginian bird cherry, *Virginischer Traubenkirschbaum* (German), *Virginische Traubenkirsche* (German), *Virgisk haeg* (Danish), Wild cherry, and *Würg-Kirsche* (German).

Warning – leaves and unprocessed fruit are poisonous.

Virginiana means 'of or from Virginia (United States)' which itself was named after the English 'Virgin Queen' Elizabeth I (1533-1603).

The tiny dark purple-red (occasionally yellow) berries are particularly enjoyed by birds. Any that are left can be found occasionally in local markets where they are bought and served cooked to make pies and preserves, or are made into wine.

The tree has been known to some of the North American Indian tribes such as the Menominee for hundreds of years as both a source of food and of medicine.

For the Menominee it seems that its greatest virtues rested in the inner bark which they prepared and drank as a tea with meals. The fruit, which were a staple food for the Blackfoot Indians, were also eaten by some of the Algonkin, the Cherokee, some of the Chippewa, some of the Dakota, the Thompson, Omaha, Abnaki, Montana Indian, Okanagan-Colville, Potawatomi, Meskwaki, Menominee and some of the Apache tribes. They were dried for future use while hunting or for Winter food say by the Cheyenne, Chippewa, Montana Indian, Thompson, Okanagan-Colville, Blackfoot, Omaha and Iroquois, and the latter and the Blackfoot, some of the Chippewa and the Montana Indian tribe also used the fruit to make a soup. Blackfoot Indians (for whom a berry soup was a ceremonial dish) stuck twigs into roasting meat to flavour it (and like the Montana Indian tribe also crushed the fruit with fat to make a kind of biscuit). Some of the Cree used the fruit in savoury dishes, and some of the Algonkin made the cherries into preserves. The Thompson, some of the Cree and also the Iroquois Indians all used the fruit to make a sauce, while the Cheyenne, some of the Dakota and the Montana Indian tribes made the fruit into puddings. Various beverages were made from choke cherry. Some of the Dakota tribe used the leaves to make a tea which was drunk during the Sun Dance, and like the Menominee the Meskwaki also made a tea from the bark. Thompson Indians drank the fruit juice, Blackfoot Indians toasted husbands or favoured children in a special fruit drink, and the Chippewa made a tea from the twigs. An alcoholic wine was also prepared with the berries by the Potawatomi, the Thompson and some of the Algonkin Indians.

Wood and sap were also harnessed to the North American tribes' advantage. Blackfoot Indians used the wood to make cooking and digging tools, and both the Cheyenne and some of the Dakota tribe made arrow shafts from it (the Cheyenne used it for their bows as well). Teepee stakes and pins were made from choke cherry wood by the Crow, and the

Cherokee used this hard wood for construction, furniture and carving. Straight branches provided the Blackfoot tribe with backrests. The sap was used to make paint by the Montana Indian tribe, and the Crow used it as glue.

Bundles of small branches were tied to some of the Dakota Indians' Sun Dance poles, and they also twigs during the Sun Dance. Some of the Navajo tribe used choke cherry during their rituals too.

A bark decoction provided a hair wash for the Chippewa tribe who believed its use encouraged the hair's growth and strengthened it too.

In veterinary medicine the Menominee treated wounds on any of their livestock with a poultice of the inner bark, and the Iroquois gave a branch, leaf and berry decoction to any of their horses suffering from diarrhoea.

As a human medicine choke cherry seems to have been popular with quite a few North American Indian tribes. It was given to Cheyenne children to enhance their appetite, the Meskwaki used it as a sedative, and the Potawatomi and Okanagan-Colville Indians took it as a tonic. Some of the Chippewa tribe used it for general lung disorders, and the Iroquois and Chippewa Indians both viewed it as a possible remedy for tuberculosis. It was taken as a purgative by Chippewa and Blackfoot Indians, and as a milder laxative by the Thompson tribe. On the other hand it provided a remedy for diarrhoea for the Crow, Flathead, Micmac, Thompson, Sanpoil, some of the Cree, the Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Okanagan-Colville, Penobscot, Cheyenne (adults and children), Iroquois, Menominee (adults and children) and Kutenai Indian tribes. The Gros Ventre, Kutenai, Crow and Flathead Indians all turned to it for treating dysentery, it was an Iroquois remedy for cholera, and the Okanagan-Colville, Meskwaki and some of the Navajo Indians used it for stomach upsets. Choke cherry offered a way of easing influenza in the Thompson tribe. They, the Cherokee and the Okanagan-Colville all used it for colds, and the latter three as well as the Iroquois and some of the Algonkin prescribed it for coughs. Blackfoot, Chippewa and Cherokee tribes all eased sore throats using various parts of the plant. It offered a remedy for blood diseases for the Iroquois, Chippewa and Cherokee tribes. The Cherokee used it to treat both measles and fever generally, and both the Iroquois and Cherokee used choke cherry during childbirth and to stem internal bleeding. Chippewa Indians found it helpful in easing stomach cramps, it was used to treat worms by the Flathead tribe, and the Meskwaki turned to it for treating piles. Both the Potawatomi and Flathead Indians used the bark and bark resin respectively for soothing sore eyes. Various skin disorders were treated with it by the Okanagan-Colville, Cherokee and Crow Indians, and the latter applied it to burns. The Iroquois and Menominee tribes applied it to wounds.

Herbalists in North America have also administered it as a remedy for diarrhoea and jaundice, and it has performed a role as an ingredient both in cough mixtures and in poultices.