

# Growing and using University of Saskatchewan Sour Cherries

By Bob Bors

## History

It took 60 years of breeding to combine the hardiness of Mongolian sour cherries with fruit quality of European Sour Cherries. Breeders Les Kerr, Dr. Stewart Nelson, Dr. Cecile Stushnoff, Rick Sawatzky, and Dr. Bob Bors were all involved in their improvement. What resulted were cherry varieties that grow like bushes that are much hardier than other sour cherries and have improved fruit quality. The University of Saskatchewan is the coldest location in the world to breed sour cherries. Most of our cherries are burgundy or almost black because that's the colour of the good tasting sour cherries from Europe that were used in breeding.

## Care

Sour cherries are self-compatible and do not need another variety planted nearby in order to fruit. But if you love sour cherries, additional varieties will ripen at different times, extending the harvest season.

Choose a location where it is protected from north and west winds. Plants should receive at least half a day of direct sunlight in summer, but more is better. The soil should be well drained. They do best on loams and sandy loams but can be grown on clay soils with good drainage. When grown on sandy soils, insure they are irrigated regularly. During their first 3 years, the plants require even moisture until the roots are well established. They become more tolerant of less water once they are older and better established. Under ideal conditions, they grow 2 to 2.5 m tall and are producing well in year 5 or 6.

Sour cherry plants should be given at least a square meter of space when young, with no grass or weed competition. Mulching with an organic mulch such as bark, leaves, straw, post peelings or grass clippings is extremely beneficial. Permanent plastic mulch is not advised because it is desirable to allow suckering near the base to form multiple stems or trunks. One could use plastic mulch for the first 3 years but then remove it. Because sour cherries are grown on their own roots, allowing suckers to develop creates a wider bush that is easily renewed by pruning. Suckers will have the same quality fruit as the original branches.

Sour cherries do sucker. It's best to give them a location of their own and not put them in a vegetable garden.

Train USASK sour cherries as shrubs rather than trees. During severe winters, it has always been the older trunks that are killed, especially if they have been producing fruit for a few years. If a shrub has young, intermediate and old stems forming at its base, it can recover from a severe winter in only a year or two. But if trained as a single-trunk tree that is winter damaged or killed, recovery is much slower. A severely damaged tree-form may renew itself by cutting out the trunk and nurturing suckers that may form its base or, but this may take 5 years.

Do not over fertilize, especially in hardiness zone 3, as this may reduce hardiness. Apply fertilizer in the spring as new growth is emerging, not in late summer or fall. If planting in fall, give it ample water but

not fertilizer. Plant sour cherries a couple inches deeper than they were growing in the pot. That way, if slight heaving occurs during the winter, the plant will not be injured.

All our cherries are highly prized by deer and require tall fencing in rural areas. Deer will eat the younger branches year round and have been known to wipe out very young trees.

## **Yield**

Yields depend largely on their growing conditions and how much space the plants are given in which to. Better growers of the University of Saskatchewan cherries often obtain 30 lbs of fruit by year 5 or 6. We have obtained about 20 lbs per bush under very close spacing. Some gardeners have had 75 lbs of fruit on bushes that were allowed to spread more freely. While we don't yet have data on the yield of 'Sweet Thing', we think it at least as good as our previous varieties.

Unlike other prunus species like plums and apricots, sour cherries don't automatically drop off branches when ripe. There is usually a 2 week window where they are at their peak flavour, which in Saskatoon is usually the first 2 weeks of August. If picked the last week in July they will be redder, more sour, but still good for cooking. Waiting until the last half of August is possible. Cherries will still taste good but will be shrivelling and birds may get them.

## **What to do with cherries**

Sour cherries are the type of cherry most often used in cooking and processing. Although called a "sour cherry", USASK cherries are sweeter and less acidic than other sour cherries. Like other sour cherries, it makes great pies, jams, baked goods, juice, wine, liqueur, gelato, dried cherries or can be added to dairy products.

**More Information** Volunteers Loretta Bors, Lily Sawatzky and Cecilia Kachkowski compiled over 300 recipes in ***Cooking with Cherries from the Prairies***. It won a Gormand World Cookbook Award and we were told by the founder of the Gormand awards that it has more recipes than any other cherry cookbook.

For more detailed information of their care, especially on pruning and training, obtain a copy of ***Growing Fruit in Northern Gardens*** by Sara Williams and Bob Bors. Due to great demand, this book is currently being reprinted and should be available by late September 2021. It was shortlisted in two categories in the Saskatchewan Book Awards.

The books are available at the University of Saskatchewan bookstore and McNally Robinson bookstore, when the fruit program has events, or when the authors give presentations.

There are several articles about sour cherries, fruit events and many other fruit crops at [WWW.fruit.usask.ca](http://WWW.fruit.usask.ca)