Sour Cherry

Grow with USask

The breeding of dwarf sour cherries began in the 1940's by Dr. Les Kerr. The past 50 years of breeding have combined cold hardiness, dwarf stature and good fruit quality into the final product. The cherry releases by the University of Saskatchewan are a great tasting cherry with high sugar content. They also have very good potential for mechanical harvesting which is necessary for commercial fruit production.

The sour cherry was created from crossing the Mongolian cherry with the sweet cherry. This happened quite frequently in nature. The sour cherry was then crossed to another Mongolian cherry, a new and improved variety to get the dwarf sour cherry.

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Growth Habit

- Trees range from 1.75 meters to 2.5 meters (5-8 feet) tall. Some suckering can happen with some varieties. This amount of suckering increases if the soil around the tree is continually tilled or disturbed. These trees are unique as they are not grafted and are on their own roots.
- Sour cherries usually flower in mid to late May. These trees can be quite stunning in the spring as the flowers open slightly before the leaves emerge and the tree turns into a ball of white flowers.
- The leaves are very glossy and shiny which adds some ornamental value
- The fruit is usually ripe in early August and can range in colour from red to dark red to a black red. Cherry splitting is caused by dry followed by wet conditions during the ripening process

Planting

- Plant in a hole that is big enough to accommodate the entire root mass of the tree. They should be planted about 2.5-5 cm (1-2 inches) deeper than they were in the nursery container.
- They should be planted about 1.5-2 m (5-7 feet) apart from each other or other plants.
- Water immediately after planting and water well until established.

Trees range in size from 1.75 meters tp 2.5 meters (5-8 ft tall).

Pollination

• Dwarf Sour Cherries are self-fertile and therefore do not need another plant for pollination. That means that if you only want one shrub in your yard you only need one, or you can have two of the same varieties and you will still get fruit.

Pruning

• Prune in early spring before the bushes break dormancy, diseased or damaged wood can be removed at any time.
• Thinning cuts are better suited to cherries then heading back cut. A heading back cut (taking the top/tip portion off of a branch) tends to remove vegetative buds and the plant will have nothing to make new shoots from. Thinning cuts (when you remove an entire branch here and there) is better suited as you won't be removing a specific kind of bud.
• Never remove more than 25% of wood in one season.
• Cherries can be selectively regenerated by removing some of the old branches every year and allowing the new branches to slowly take over

Harvesting

• Cherries can be handpicked or shaken off. Just beware if you shake the cherries off you are liable to get lots of stems in with the fruit.
• They should be picked in the cool parts of the morning or evening and refrigerated as soon after picking as possible.

Cultivars

Many years of breeding has resulted in the release of 6 dwarf sour cherry varieties. Each variety is different from one another in some way so it gives the home owner a lot of choice.

Cultivars	Height	Suckers	Fruit Size (g)	Fruit Colour	Maturity	Other
Carmine Jewel	2 m (6.5 ft)	few	3.5	Black Red	Ripens earlier than other varieties	Great for Processing and eating
Romeo	2 m (6.5 ft)	few	4.0	Dark Red	Ripens mid August	Can have some hardiness issues in rural areas
Valentine	2.5 m (8 ft)	some	4.5	Med Red	Ripens early to mid August	Tart flavour, great for processing
Crimson Passion	1.75 m (5.5 ft)	hardly any	6.0	Dark Red	Ripens mid August	Some hardiness issues in rural areas, sweetest flavour
Juliet	2 m (6.5 ft)	some	5.0	Dark Red	Ripens early to mid August	Best for fresh eating out of the bunch, excellent flavour
Cupid	2.5 m (8 ft)	few	6.5	Dark Red	Ripens about 1 week later than other varieties	Blooms later than the other cultivars, largest fruit

Pests

• Deer, mice and voles have a bad habit of snacking on the bark and new growth of cherries. If you ever have a dead tree in the spring check the base of the trunk, if all of the bark has been removed in a complete circle you can thank the mice and voles for killing that tree.
• Birds can sometimes eat or peck at the cherry fruit but they tend to prefer the smaller pin cherries to the sour cherries.
• Cherry Fruit Fly or cherry maggots can sometimes be a problem but that is usually only noticeable in commercial situations. Cherries that have a maggot inside will float in a tub of water so they can be screened out that way.
• Bacterial Canker is when gum covered cankers appear on branches and twigs. It's most common on lower limbs and can cause the branches to die back during the summer.
• Leaf Spot is when small purple spots appear on the leaves and the leaves turn yellow and fall off. This is not usually a big problem as the tree will come back healthy the next spring.
• Other less common diseases include powdery mildew, American brown rot and verticillium wilt. ■