

UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

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Bush Cherries

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The most common and adapted cherry that Nebraskans and people from the Midwest are familiar with are tart cherries. Of these cherries the 'Montmorency' has been the long time standard in the Midwest. The 'Montmorency' is a medium sized tree that has been in cultivation for over 400 years. Other varieties of tart cherry includes 'Evan', 'Rose' and a recent release named 'Balaton'. There is also a naturally dwarf variety 'North Star' available, which is extremely hardy and thrives in the harsh Midwest environment.

History of Shrub Cherries

A less known form of tart cherries is the bush cherries. Bush cherries are extremely hardy (Zone 2), suffer from relatively few insect and disease problems and actually have a higher sugar content than tree types of tart cherries. Development of bush cherries began in Canada in the 1940's and resulted in a type that was market as the Mongolian cherry. During the 1980's crosses were made with the naturally dwarf tree form 'North Star'. The result of crosses between these tree shrub forms, was a shrub form of tart cherry that is very hardy and has the high quality fruit characteristics of 'North Star' with increased sugar content.

Recent Releases

The first of these crosses released was named 'Carmine Jewel'. It reaches a height of 6 foot and a width of 5-6 foot. Spacing between plants should be 6 foot. 'Carmine Jewel' is self-pollinating, meaning the flowers from the bush will pollinate each other although a second pollinating type of bush cherry could result in increased fruit set. Fruit yields for established plants can approach 30 pounds.

The newest developments out of Canada include five varieties that were released as the Romance Series in 2005. These include 'Juliet', 'Valentine', 'Cupid', 'Romeo' and 'Crimson Passion'. All five varieties have larger fruit with a higher sugar content than 'Montmorency' and other tree

forms of tart cherries. These varieties are not yet readily available in the United States but can be found with some diligence.

Site Selection, Planting & Care of Bush Cherries

When planting bush cherries and other long term crops it is always important to begin with a soil test and correct any deficiencies prior to planting. Bush cherries require much less space than the tree types. Row spacing of 6 to 7 feet from center of plant to center of plant will allow easy access for harvest, and promote good air movement to help reduce disease incidence.

Bush cherries have relatively low fertility requirements and most Midwestern soils have adequate fertility levels unless the soil test indicates otherwise. If fertilization is warranted it is important to fertilize early in the growing season during the period of rapid growth. Later season fertilization may promote growth too late in the season, and possibly result in winter injury to the plant.

Watering is extremely important early in the development of the plant. The most common plant size available is rooted cuttings that are one year old with a limited root system. It is important to make sure the plant has adequate soil moisture available for growth. Conserving soil moisture through the use of mulch can reduce the need for irrigation and help in the control of weeds which will sap soil moisture away from the cherries.



Fruit Production

Bush forms of cherries begin producing fruit sooner than the tree forms. Fruit production begins at the third year. Full production is achieved during the fifth year if the plants have experienced normal growing conditions. Twenty to 30 pounds of fruit can be expected per plant once the cherries are established. Depending on the variety, harvest can be as early as late July or as late as September.

Pest Problems

Bush cherries have few disease and insect pests. The primary disease issue to watch out for is cherry leaf spot. Cherry leaf spot is a fungal disease which will turn the leaves yellow. These yellow leaves will be covered with black spots that contain the fungal spores. Heavy infestations can result in total defoliation of the tree soon after harvest. It is important not to let this happen as it is extremely stressful on the tree, can reduce winter hardiness, and greatly affect the following year's crop. Fungicide application beginning early in the season will easily control this disease.

Cherry maggots can be an issue many years and are the larval form of a small fly. These small larva are found inside the fruit itself. Spraying to control this pest needs to begin early in the season to insure worm free fruit. Consult the [Midwest Tree Fruit Spray Guide](#) for recommendation on all you insect and disease problems.

Bush cherries can be a highly productive addition to your acreage landscape. Their versatility allows them to be planted in a variety of settings. They can be an integral part of your formal or edible landscape because of their beautiful flowers and fruit. You can plant them in a windbreak enhancing the structure while supplying delicious cherries to you and wildlife. They are well worth the effort.