

Plant ID of the Month

Stafford Cooperative Extension Office

May 13, 2019

Answer: *Prunus virginiana* L. (Chokecherry) (Family: Rosaceae)

As its name would suggest, chokecherry does cause those who eat the cherry to gag. Its fruits are very bitter; so, when a person unknowingly consumes the fruit it is regurgitated. According to the USDA, *Prunus virginiana* plant fact sheet, precaution should be taken as the plant can be poisonous. The seeds, stem, leaves produce hydrocyanic acid. As a result, before the fruits are released into the market they are treated in an effort to deactivate the poisonous glycosides molecules in which a sugar molecule is bonded to a non-sugar) contained within the cherries. Death and illnesses have been reported from eating the untreated cherries.

Prunus virginiana is a food source for humans; the cherries are used to make jams, jellies and preserves. It was first cultivated in 1724 on North American orchards. It is also used for conservation; the shrubs are planted in shelterbelts and windbreaks in an effort to minimize dust storms and soil erosion.

Since the leaves, stem, seed, bark of the chokecherry are toxic it can be poisonous to husbandry animals. Cattle and sheep are mainly affected by the cherries and this usually happen when they consume a quarter of their body weight.

Rabbits, birds, bears and other wildlife animals seek out the cherries and aid in dispersing the seeds.

Chokecherry is a native perennial plant. It can either be woody, deciduous (seasonal) shrub or small tree. The plant can be grown in a wide variety of soils.

The leaves of chokecherry are dark green, glossy on the topside and pale on the underside. The leaves have very fine, pointed teeth at the margin. Leaves are alternate, simple and glabrous.



How do you tell the difference between chokecherry and black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), our most common cherry species in Virginia? Black cherry has leaves with rounded teeth at the margin.



The flowers of chokecherry are perfect and aromatic, they are cylindrical racemes 3 to 6 inches long of 5 white petals. Flowers can be seen before leaves fully develop. Flowers may appear from April to July and fruits form a couple of months later.



Ripe cherries of *Prunus virginiana* range from dark red or purple to almost black.



The bark of young trees may vary from gray to a reddish brown. As it ages the bark turns darker, into brownish-black and becomes noticeably furrowed.



Native or planted chokecherry may become infected with a common fungal disease called black knot. It causes galls (or swellings) to occur on branches, twigs, and/or the main trunk. Galls typically appear soft and olive green when newly formed, but eventually become hard and black with age. Several galls can infect a single tree and usually cause branch death beyond the area of the infection. These galls, which are longer than wide, may extend up the branch from a few inches to a foot or more. They are especially noticeable before the leaves emerge in the spring. If seen developing on small branches, prune them off at the stem in the winter and burn.



Till next time. David/Guy

FYI:

Beside the leaves, there are two other ways to tell the difference between chokecherry and black cherry. First is the way the stems of the fruit are attached to the fruit. Chokecherry fruit have stems attached to the fruit like...well...cherries.



The stems of black cherry fruit are attached to the fruit by a broad, expanded cup, a bit like the way an eggplant fruit is attached to its stem.



The second way is size. Chokecherry is small, often 3 - 5 feet tall. Black cherry tends to be large tree, up to 60 feet.