

Chokecherry



We found in the mountain passes today a considerable quantity of a small fruit called the choke-cherry, a species of prunus, growing on low bushes. When ripe, they are tolerable eating, somewhat astringent, ... ordinarily so abundant that it constitutes a large portion of the vegetable food of both Indians and white trappers who visit these regions. - John Kirk Townsend, 1834.

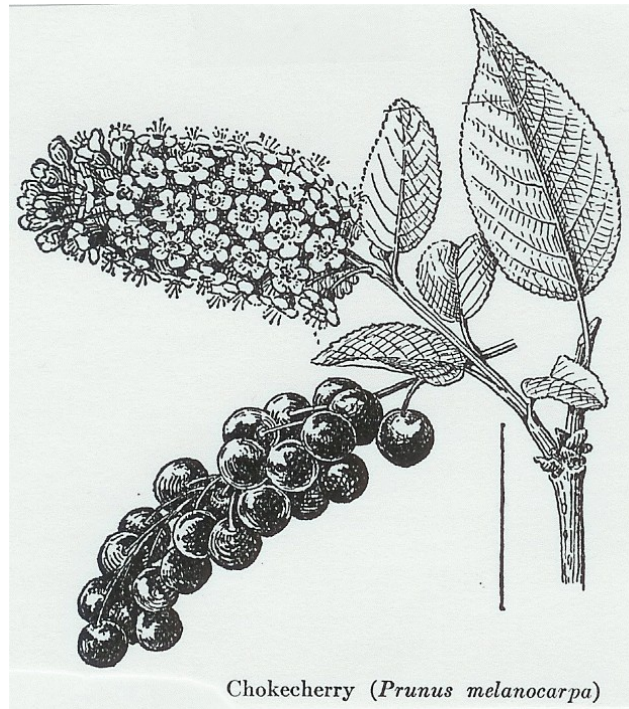
A common hardy small tree that reproduces actively from seeds dropped by birds, the chokecherry thrives in the Colorado mountains and along streams in the foothills, at elevations from 4500 to 9000 feet (1400 to 2750 m). The chokecherry of Colorado rarely exceeds 20 feet (6 m) in height and 4 inches (10 cm) in trunk diameter, though it rarely has a trunk nearly a foot (30 cm) across. It grows along or near streams of the lower valleys, as single saplings and as thickets, and in mountain parks and canyons and in protected gullies in the prairies.

Chokecherry is one of the first trees to leaf out in the spring, its leaves appearing in early April in the lower foothills, with green flower structures standing upright at first. White flowers appear in three to six-inch long clusters in late spring. The fruit is dark red to purple or black when ripe from July through September; it is eaten by grouse, turkeys, other birds, raccoons, bear, fox, deer, coyotes, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, rabbits, and squirrels.

The fruit is edible by humans too, and can be used to make jelly and wine, but the leaves and stems are said to be poisonous. The Lewis and Clark expedition flavored a keg of whiskey with chokecherries. Indians used the entire Chokecherry fruit -- seed and pulp all ground up together -- as one of the main ingredients in pemmican, which also included fat and jerked meat, a kind of early trail mix or hard rations. They used the bark for green dye and the berries for red dye. The wood is tough with twisted grain, making it hard to split so it is good for ax handles and tent stakes.

Leaves: 2 to 4 inches (5 to 10 cm) long; pointed with a U-shaped baseleafstalks $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch (12 to 25 cm) long; edges finely toothed. The teeth may be so small as to be almost invisible.

Stems: The latest year's new growth twigs are shiny and reddish brown with rounded white bumps (lenticels; breathing pores). Twigs and bark emit an odor of bitter almonds when crushed and tasted; they are poisonous if eaten in quantity.



Fruit: first green, then red, and dark purple or black when ripe, in a long raceme, a linear strand (rather than in a spray of individual fruits attached to a common point as in Pin cherry), $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch (6 to 12 mm) diameter, appears from July to September depending on location. Flowers between April and June depending on elevation.

Bark: thin, gray with possible slight red-brown tint, with shallow fissures. White spots are common.

The scientific name is *Prunus virginiana*. Western varieties include *melanocarpa* and *demissa*.

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