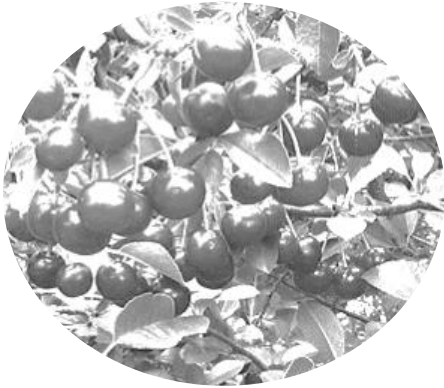


Canadian Dwarf Sour Cherries are great for Small Minnesota Gardens



'Carmine Jewel',
University of Saskatchewan

Until recently, home owners had two choices for cherries: sweet cherries or sour cherries. Sweet cherries are those that are usually eaten fresh. Unfortunately for us Minnesotans, sweet cherries (Zone 5) are not quite hardy enough to survive our colder, Zone 4 winters. Also they are not self-fertile and require two different sweet cherry varieties to cross pollinate for fruit set.

Sour (or tart or pie) cherries are used primarily for pie fillings and preserves. They are generally cold hardy in our region, are self-fertile, and do not require a second variety for good fruit set. The most popular varieties for canning and pie making are 'North Star', 'Montmorency', and 'Meteor'. 'North Star' is the most compact variety at 8 to 12 feet tall, while the other two can grow up to 20 and 30 feet. The size of these trees may make them impractical for many home owners.

Since 1970, Canadian scientists have been hard at work crossbreeding very cold-hardy, ground-hugging cherry varieties from Mongolia and Siberia with our sweet and sour cherries. After thousands of selections and crosses, including some with the University of Minnesota variety 'Northstar', a new series of cherry plants was born. The University of Saskatchewan released the first dwarf sour cherry cultivar 'Carmine Jewel' in 1999. In 2004, more dwarf bush cherries were introduced and were named the Romance Series. These include: 'Juliet', 'Valentine', 'Cupid', 'Romeo' and 'Crimson Passion'. These are all similar in growth habit, productivity, and taste. Compared to other pie cherry varieties, the fruit of the Romance Series is sweeter, redder, and bigger.

Why else should gardeners grow these new bush cherries?

All of these varieties are all self-fruitful, so a second variety is not essential for pollination. However, bees and a second sour cherry variety may help in increasing fruit set. These sour cherries are propagated on their own roots and are natural dwarfs. They have been bred and selected to have minimal suckers. With their Mongolian/Siberian ancestry, the dwarf sour cherries are extremely cold hardy and survive temperatures down to -40°F. The plants grow from 5-7 feet in height, a perfect size for ease of maintenance and ease of harvest—no more climbing up on tall and dangerous ladders to prune and to harvest the fruit. By some reports, the cultivar 'Carmine Jewel' has produced 20 to 30 pounds of fruit per bush, and even up to 75 pounds per bush have been reported—perhaps on some carefully-tended backyard bushes. These cherries typically start producing in their 4th year and come into full production by year 5.

The Brix scale is a measurement of the grams of sugar per 100 grams of juice. Dwarf sour cherries have much more sweetness than other sour cherries. The dwarf sour cherries have measured over 20 units on the Brix scale, while ordinary sour cherries have scored only 10 to 16. The sweetness of the fruit is very close to that of sweet cherries, but the citric acid levels give the fruit a robust flavor. Wait before picking; it takes the fruit a full 3 weeks after first turning red to double its sugar content. Even the stems have been bred to hold on to the fruit for that time. The pulp color is a deep red which goes to the pit. The pits have been bred to be round, small, and easily removed with a mechanical pitter.

The other sour cherries in our gardens have bright red skin and a pale or yellowish pulp. In processing of the older sour cherries like 'Montmorency', there is often not enough red color, and dye or beet juice is added to enhance the color. Not so with 'Carmine Jewel' – the deep color is there. When frozen berries of 'Montmorency' sour cherry are thawed, an ugly brown mess is seen. When 'Carmine Jewel' is thawed, the nice red color remains. The dark juices of 'Carmine Jewel' and her sisters are loaded with healthy phytonutrients and Vitamin C. One guy supposedly even "cured" his arthritis by drinking cherry juice for a few weeks. The fruit does freeze beautifully. Pit the fruit easily by gently squeezing with the fingers, or pluck the pits out with a bent paper clip. Freeze on a baking sheet for a few hours and then package up into plastic freezer bags for later juice, jams, pies, and preserves.

The plants are grown and maintained much like other cherries. Dwarf bush cherries are readily adaptable to most soils, preferring a sandy loam, or other soils as long as they are not waterlogged. Since dwarf sour cherries produce so few suckers, slightly deeper planting is recommended to encourage multiple basal stems in case a stem suffers rodent damage, and needs replacement. These cherries do not like grass or weed competition, and the plants grow much larger and more vigorously if the area around the plant is kept weed-free and grass-free. A 4 inch layer of organic mulch, kept a few inches from the bark, will control weeds and help retain moisture.

Plants are relatively disease and pest free. Protection is needed from deer and rodents. North Dakota did report a loss of approximately 50% of their cherry harvest one year due to Spotted Wing Drosophila. This is a recent pest introduction that threatens crops of raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, grapes, cherries, and other stone fruit ([Spotted Wing Drosophila in Home Gardens](http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/insects/find/spotted-wing-drosophila-in-home-gardens), <http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/insects/find/spotted-wing-drosophila-in-home-gardens>). Weekly spraying with appropriate pesticide may be needed to control the pest.

Maintenance is minimal. Pruning should maintain an open-vase form; some growers let the plants go and do no pruning until the plant is about 4 years old.

The dwarf bush cherry, with all its advantages, is also a wonderful specimen plant or hedge plant in a home landscape. Our 'Carmine Jewel' plant is 4 years old and about 5 feet high. The leaves are a rich, deep green on a well-formed plant. The flowers are larger than other cherry flowers and are beautiful. After it starts producing well this year or next, I look forward to a bountiful crop of delicious and healthy berries. If I haven't convinced you yet to rush out and buy this plant, keep in mind that an award winning wine has been made from its fruit. I bet thousands of American homeowners will soon discover these great plants and their ruby jewels.

Not all varieties may be available yet in America. It takes a few thousand dollars and a few years to insure that the cherry stock is virus, disease, and insect free. Some Canadian dwarf bush cherries are available from:

Gurneys <https://www.gurneys.com>

Henry Fields <http://www.henryfields.com/>

Honeyberry USA (A MN nursery, good selection) <http://honeyberryusa.com/honeyberry-plants-2.html>

Happy Gardening,

Joe Baltrukonis