**Prunus virginiana**  
[PROO-nus vir-jin-ee-AN-uh]

**Family:** Rosaceae

**Names:** chokecherry, Virginia cherry, black cherry, scrub pine, Common Chokecherry, Virginia Pine; nonpazhinga [little cherry] (Omaha/Ponca); naahaapi nakaaruts [cherry tree] (Pawnee); canpa'hu [bitter-wood stem] (Lakota); pukkeep [chokecherry] puckkeep [the berry] (Blackfeet); monotse [berries] (Cheyenne); makwi’minuni (Mesquakie); o’hpan-au-gaw (Kiowa); malupwa (Crow); schla scha (Flathead); champah (Assiniboin); goonpa (Osage); capulin (Mexican)

**Description:** A shrub or small tree 6-20 feet, often forming thickets; small branches red-brown to dark brown. The fruit has a sweetish, astringent, bitter taste, and is much employed in some parts of the country to impart flavor to liquors. Very similar to *P. serotina* except the leaves of *P. virginiana* have sharper teeth on the margins, and the branches of fruit are a little shorter and ripen a little later. It is hardy to zone 6. It is in leaf all year, and the seeds ripen from October to February. The flowers are monoecious and are pollinated by the wind. The plant is not self-fertile.

**Cultivation:** Thrives in a light well-drained sandy or gravelly loam. Dislikes poorly drained moorland soils. Established plants tolerate drought. Succeeds in very acid soils in the wild. Often used in reforestation projects that are aimed at reclaiming exhausted soils in N. America. Trees are short-lived in the wild, they can produce cones when 5 years old, though 8 - 10 years is the average. Large crops are followed by 1 - 2 years of low seed production. The cones take 2 years to mature, then open and shed their seed whilst still attached to the tree. The empty cones persist on the trees for 3 - 4 years. Plants are strongly outbreeding, self-fertilized seed usually grows poorly. They hybridize freely with other members of this genus. Leaf secretions inhibit the germination of seeds, thereby reducing the amount of plants that can grow under the trees. Plants in this genus are notably susceptible to honey fungus.

It is best to sow the seed in individual pots in a cold frame as soon as it is ripe if this is possible otherwise in late winter. A short stratification of 6 weeks at 36°F can improve
the germination of stored seed. Plant seedlings out into their permanent positions as soon as possible and protect them for their first winter or two. Plants have a very sparse root system and the sooner they are planted into their permanent positions the better they will grow. Trees should be planted into their permanent positions when they are quite small, between 30 and 90cm. We actually plant them out when they are about 5 - 10cm tall. So long as they are given a very good weed-excluding mulch they establish very well. Larger trees will check badly and hardly put on any growth for several years. This also badly affects root development and wind resistance. Cuttings. This method only works when taken from very young trees less than 10 years old. Use single leaf fascicles with the base of the short shoot. Disbudding the shoots some weeks before taking the cuttings can help. Cuttings are normally slow to grow away.

**History:** Chokecherries were the most important wild fruit to the Indians of the Prairie Biorion, who used the dried, crushed berries in their meat-fat-chokecherry mixture known as Pemmican. It was also used to treat an array of ailments. The Blackfeet drank the juice for diarrhea and sore throat. They also made a tea from the inner bark combined with the service berry bark which they drank as a purge. Blackfeet mothers drank the tea in order to pass its medicinal qualities to their nursing babies through their milk. They also administered it to their children periodically as an enema. A willow tea was used to counteract the laxative effect of the chokecherry. A tea was made from the boiled bark of the chokecherry, mixed with roots of the Western Sweet Cicely, Northern Valerian, and Sixocasim and taken internally. The fruit is very astringent or puckery which gives the “choke” part of its name. It is highly valued by cabinet-makers for this wood, which is compact, fine-grained, susceptible of polish, and of a light red tint which deepens with age.

**Constituents:** turpentine from the resin is antiseptic, diuretic, rubefacient and vermifuge.

**Medicinal Uses:** The turpentine from the resin is a valuable remedy used internally in the treatment of kidney and bladder complaints and is used both internally and as a rub and steam bath in the treatment of rheumatic affections. It is also very beneficial to the respiratory system and so is useful in treating diseases of the mucous membranes and respiratory complaints such as coughs, colds, influenza and TB. The bark is used for the feverish stages of viral infections, when there is rapid, shallow breathing and hot, dry membranes. The bark or root is boiled for stomach inflammations and acidosis. Externally it is a very beneficial treatment for a variety of skin complaints, wounds, sores, burns, boils etc and is used in the form of liniment plasters, poultices, herbal steam baths and inhalers. An infusion of the leaves has been used in the treatment of high fevers. An infusion of the buds has been used to remove worms from the body. Similar to *P. serotina*. The fruit was basic to the making of pemmican.

**Dosage:** For dry coughs and arthritis, take a scant to rounded teaspoon in water. Cold infusion, 2-6 fluid ounces up to 3 times a day.

**Remedies:**

**Tonsillitis/Sore Throat Lozenges**

- 1 tsp goldenrod leaves
- 1 tsp wild cherry bark
- 1 tsp licorice root
- 1 tsp yerba sante leaves
- 1 tsp slippery elm bark
- 2 cups water
- 3 cups sugar
- 3 Tbsp corn syrup

Place the above herbs in a pan and cover with the water. Bring the mixture to a boil and boil for 20 minutes. Remove from the heat and cool. Strain the solution and add the sugar and the corn syrup. Place back on the heat, bring to a boil, then reduce heat to medium. Cook until the mixture reaches 300F (hard-crack stage). Pour the syrup onto a large, buttered baking sheet; cool, then break into
one-inch pieces. Use as you would any cough drop.

General Illness Tonic
1 tsp wild cherry bark
1 tsp red willow bark
1 tsp wild cherry root
1 tsp red willow root
4 cups water

Combine the herbs in a pan and cover with the water. Bring to a boil and boil for 30 minutes; strain and cool. Refrigerate. Take one to two tablespoons at a time, as needed. The Okanagan-Colville Indians drank this decoction for any type of sickness.

Toxicity: The wood, sawdust and resins from various species of pine can cause dermatitis in sensitive people. Do not gather before midsummer, as prussic acid may be present in the bark earlier, and the herb will be overly depressing to respiration.

Other Uses: A tan or green dye is obtained from the needles. The needles contain a substance called terpene, this is released when rain washes over the needles and it has a negative effect on the germination of some plants, including wheat. The wood is coarse-grained, light, soft, weak and brittle, durable in contact with the soil. It weighs 33lb per cubic foot. It is used mainly for pulp and occasionally as lumber in rough construction or as a fuel.

Dye Recipes:
½ pot wild cherry bark
4 gallons water
1 lb alum-mordanted wool

Either soak the bark overnight or boil for longer than usual. Strain out the plant material, and add enough water to make up the 4 gallons. Heat the wool so that there will be no sudden temperature change to cause it to shrink. Enter it in to the dye ooze and stir. Simmer it for ¾ hour, or so. Cool and rinse till the water runs clear. Color: rosy tan; with chrome: slightly deeper tan.

1 pot wild cherry leaves
4 gallons water
1 lb alum – or chrome-mordanted wool

Boil the leaves in the usual way and put the wet, warm premordanted wool into the dye ooze. Simmer it for ¾ hour or so or until you like the color. Cool and rinse. Tin with any fruit tree leaf gives off toxic fumes and should be done outside. Color: with alum: golden yellow, with chrome: tobacco gold.

Culinary Uses: Seed - raw or cooked. Rich in oil with a resinous flavor. The seed is very small. A vanillin flavoring is obtained as a by-product of other resins that are released from the pulpwod. A tea is made from the leaves. To remove pits, cook the berries (with sugar if not making a recipe), then strain the mixture through a sieve to separate the syrup from the pits.

Recipes:
Wild Cherry Soup
5 cups cherries, washed and pitted
1 ¼ cups water
1 inch cinnamon bark
zest of 1 lemon
1 ¼ cups red wine
a little dried mashed potato

Place the cherries, water, cinnamon, and lemon zest in a saucepan, bring the mixture to a boil, and cook over high heat, covered, for 10 minutes. Then transfer the lot to a blender and purée. Combine the wine and the cherry mixture, and thicken to taste with the mashed potato. Sweeten as necessary, reheat, and serve at once. (Wild Foods)

Wild Cherry Wine
10 cups cherries
1 gallon water
6 cups sugar
grated rind and juice of 1 ½ lemons
1 ½ tsp yeast

Pick the cherries when they are really ripe, then de-stem and wash them. Bring 3 quarts of the water to a boil, place the cherries in a bucket, and pour the boiling water over them. When they have cooled, mash them with your hands. Allow them to stand, covered with
Chokecherry Jelly

Stem about 4 lbs of fully ripened chokecherries. Place them in a kettle with
enough water to barely cover the chokecherries. Cover and cook for 15 or 20 minutes. Strain the
juice through a jelly bag or a double thickness of cheesecloth. In a large kettle, combine 3
cups of the chokecherry juice with 6 ½ cups of sugar and stir to mix. Bring to a boil over high
heat, stirring constantly. Stir in 1 bottle of liquid fruit pectin and bring to a full rolling
boil, stirring constantly. Boil hard, while stirring, until the jelly stage is reached.
Remove the jelly from the heat. Stir, and skim off the foam. Add ¼ tsp of almond extract.
Seal the jelly in hot, sterilized jars. Makes 9 half-pints. (The Wild Flavor)

Chokecherry-Apple Butter

Make a puree of cored, unpeeled apples and ripe chokecherries by cooking the fruits
separately until tender in small amounts of water. Put the cooked fruits through a food
mill. Measure out 4 cups of apple puree and 2 cups of chokecherry puree. Stir and heat
combined fruits to a boil, then add 5 cups of sugar, lower the heat, and continue cooking and
stirring until the butter is thickened. Add ½ tsp almond extract to make the cherry flavor
stronger, or spice lightly with cinnamon and nutmeg, to taste. Pour the butter into hot,
sterilized jars and seal. Makes 8 half-pints. Serve with meats or game or on hot bread. (The
Wild Flavor)

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