

Knowing Our Natives: Chokecherry

As they journeyed through Nebraska on a hot July day in 1804, members of Lewis and Clark's expedition spent a morning gathering chokecherries to add to a barrel of whiskey, leading to the name whiskey chokecherry. Today, you are more likely to hear about homemade chokecherry wine than whiskey, but the name stuck. The chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) is also known as bitterberry, jamberry, and Virginia bird cherry.

Growing across Canada and the United States, you have likely encountered this shrub or small tree. In the spring chokecherries bloom with clusters of dainty white flowers and around August they are covered in small red berries with a large, toxic stone in the middle. Although it is closely related to the black cherry tree (*Prunus serotina*), chokecherry fruit is more sour and bitter.



Indigenous peoples of the Rocky Mountains and northern Plains regions traditionally relied on chokecherries as an important food source. Chokecherries are rich in antioxidants and were eaten in sun-baked cakes or as part of pemmican—a dish consisting of tallow, dried meat, and dried berries. Chokecherry has also long been used medicinally, treating colds and sore throats as well as stomach complaints like diarrhea and lack of appetite.



Chokecherries are also popular among wildlife. Deer, rabbits, and other herbivores are known to browse on the leaves and twigs, but this can be a dangerous dish. When the leaves are damaged or wilted, they release cyanide and become toxic in large quantities. Several moose deaths in Alaska are believed to be a result of eating chokecherry after the plants were damaged by a hard frost. Additionally, chokecherries are known to host over 200 species of butterflies and moths as well as provide food and nesting locations for many species of birds. With the ability to grow in a wide range of conditions, chokecherry can be an excellent addition for backyard wildlife enthusiasts!

Each month, the Beal Botanical Garden's newsletter will feature a plant native to Michigan exploring its historical, cultural, and economic importance. Our aim is to introduce (maybe reintroduce!) our community to our wonderful native plants.