



Tree of the Month • May | June 2017

by: Gilbert A Smith, ISA Board Certified Master Arborist

Black Cherry • *Prunus serotina* I Also called Wild Cherry or Rum Cherry

A large shade tree in our area of 60 feet tall, Black Cherry can grow to 100 feet where its “feet” are not standing in our heavy, clay, Illinois soil. Actually almost every tree species except Willow and Cottonwood grow 30% taller east of Lake Michigan due to the well drained, loose soil that accommodates tree roots so much better than prairie soil.



You can pick Black Cherry out in the forest by looking for its scaly, dark bark that looks like alligator skin. It is a pioneer species so it grows well on the woods edge, or where there has been disturbance like logging or building construction. For that reason you might imagine that it would do well as a suburban landscape tree. Unfortunately you can find them only in native nurseries like **Connor Shaw Nurseries**. I don't know why.

It has alternate oval, lustrous, dark green leaves that drip off the stems and laugh in the breeze. It's tough and fast growing. Maybe the reason

you can't find it in nurseries is that if you wait a few minutes the birds will plant one for you. They love the pea sized fruit which comes in clusters of dark purple and red. The birds digestive tract breaks the seed dormancy and prepares it for germination and then they fertilize it for free.

European settlers learned from Native Americans that the bark of Black Cherry was effective in treating coughs, colds, lung congestion and diarrhea. The cherries are a key ingredient in Pemmican a mix of cherries, meat and fat used to survive in the winter or while traveling. Today the berries can be gathered when they're ripe to the taste and used in pies, jams, healthful juice and evidently Rum.



Black Cherry;
photos by Lesley Bruce Smith

