

BIRD CHERRY *Prunus padus*

LATIN EXPLANATION. *proo-nus*; Classical name of the plum. Flowering and fruiting trees. *pa-dus*; Greek name for the true bird cherry.

HEIGHT - Bird cherry is a deciduous, suckering shrub or tree that varies in height from 3 to 15m (9 to 45ft). Together with blackthorn, it may be the only truly native species of *prunus*, a very large genus of about 450 species.

SOIL TYPE - In upland areas bird cherry is sometimes found on acid soils, particularly along valleys, often on poor soils. In the lowlands (where rainfall is generally lower) it occurs in wet fen woodlands where the ground water is decidedly calcareous (containing chalk or limestone).

HABITAT - Bird cherry is a "northern-western" species, occurring naturally across Scotland, Ireland and northern England, ascending to about 600m (2,000ft). The tree is very hardy but not tolerant of exposure to very strong winds. It will not thrive beneath a dense canopy, growing in open areas and at the edges of woods, in hedgerows, thickets and along streamsides.

SHAPE - The bird cherry is smaller than the wild cherry. Out in the open it tends to be strong, bushy and handsome, but it is generally a small, multi-branched shrub. It will often grow in small thickets which restricts the height of individual trees to just a few metres. Where the ground is particularly damp, they are prone to toppling over if they become tall, but will continue to grow as a line of shrubs. Both the cherries are an attractive and even spectacular sight in spring, when covered with a mass of white blossom - attracting butterflies and many other insects. Bees are particularly attracted to them, but various insects, including flies and butterflies, pollinate them. The fruit, ripe in August, is relished by birds. They are too sour for human consumption.

ASSOCIATED SPECIES - Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), downy birch (*Betula pubescens*), grey willow (*Salix cinerea*), guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*), pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*), rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), sessile oak (*Q. petraea*), wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*).

DISTRIBUTION - Native to Europe, bird cherry is generally uncommon, but frequent in areas to which it is well-suited, mainly in the north and west of Ireland, especially in Fermanagh. When flowering, it stands out clearly in glens like Glenshesk and Glenarm.

FLOWERS & SEEDS - After fertilisation, each individual flower droops out of the way of bees, to ensure they are unimpeded in their visits to the unfertilised blossoms. Flowering takes place in late April or early May, with the berries ripening to black in August.

INTERESTING FACTS

- When cut down, bird cherry soon regenerates from suckers.
- The foliage of bird cherry is poisonous to stock, especially goats and, for this reason, is sometimes used for hedging.
- Cherry wood is strong, fine-grained, and of a red colour. It is easily worked, and sustains a high polish.
- The sickly almond scented flowers attract many insects, particularly bees and flies.
- The bark was gathered in the middle ages to make an infusion used as a tonic and sedative for stomach pains.
- An infusion made of the stalks of the berries was used to treat bronchitis and anaemia.
- Bird cherry is also known as the hag berry. In the past, people warned against using the wood of this tree for any purpose, as it was considered to be a witch's tree.
- Bird cherry tea is a common and well-known remedy, prescribed for lower gastrointestinal problems.



Bird cherry fruits.



Bird cherry seeds extracted from the flesh.

