

SMALL FRUIT

SURPRISES!

4 unusual – and tasty – fruit you can grow in the Rocky Mountains

Durc Setzer | Text and Photographs

After you have laid your gardens to rest and come to terms with another Rocky Mountain winter, you might, like me, find yourself revisiting your garden's successes and your plans for it the coming season. I spend this time re-visiting the mountains of nursery magazines I receive, studying new perennial fruit offerings, and pondering my willingness to spend my money on a possible disappointment. Let me save you a little trouble this year and suggest some perennial fruit that are unlikely to disappoint.

HASKAP

Haskap (*Lonicera caerulea*) is the Japanese name for a fruiting honeysuckle also known as honeyberry and blue honeysuckle. Haskap subspecies are known to occur natively in the Rocky Mountains, and like most honeysuckles in the northwest, haskap grows readily. Unlike many other honeysuckles it is an upright or

droopy bush, reaching heights around 5 feet. The hardy plant flowers even before strawberries, from late March through early June. Cold weather as low as -30° F won't faze the dormant plant and the flowers can handle temperatures as low as 20° F. The plants do require crosspollination so cold springs can result in low fruit sets simply due to low levels of bee activity. Haskap plants can flower their first year but will put on larger yields upon reaching full maturity after four to five years, yielding up to 10 pounds of fruit per plant.

The fruit of haskap are rather unique. They are barrel shaped, ranging from stubby and almost round to elongated and cylindrical. The fruits ripen from June to July. The taste of the fruit is excellent; with notes of raspberry, blueberry, and blackberries, combined they taste like a berry medley all in one fruit. Fruit is very good fresh, frozen, juiced, and processed. Seeds are small and unnoticeable. The great flavor is not lost on the birds, who will quickly decimate your berry crop.

Care should be taken to buy named cultivars as some startup nurseries grow their stock from collected seed and resulting plants will be highly variable. Purchasing from a local nursery is a good idea as sickly and spindly mail-order plants have left me mostly with buyer's remorse. Many nurseries carry a pollinator; try to plant one pollinator variety per every five to 10 plants to ensure a good fruit set. Multiple varieties will improve pollination.

The University of Saskatchewan and Oregon State University are both involved in variety research and have released multiple cultivars to the public.

CANADIAN DWARF SOUR CHERRY

All sour cherries are hybrids of sweet cherry (*Prunus avium*) and Mongolian cherry (*Prunus fruticosa*). There are two distinct types of dwarf sour cher-



A dwarf sour cherry, 'Crimson Passion', showing vigorous growth in its second year.

ries, which have different combinations of genetics. One type includes 'Evans', also known as 'Bali', which is a larger plant with fruit resembling typical sour cherries. The other type are the Canadian dwarf sour cherries (*Prunus x kerrasis*). These are the result of a cherry-breeding program initiated in the 1940s and continued today by the University of Saskatchewan. These hybrids have fruit qualities of sweet cherries with the hardness of sour cherry.

These quick-growing plants grow to mature heights of 8-12 feet. The dormant plants are extremely hardy, surviving USDA Hardiness Zone 2 conditions. The fruit vary from normal sour cherries, being generally larger, darker and higher in sugar. Another unique trait is their red-colored flesh and juice; typical sour cherries are yellow fleshed which leads to the use of colorants in cherry products and juices.

The term "dwarf" can lead to some confusion. Many perennial fruit are grafted to a dwarfing rootstock. If the plant dies back to the graft then the fruiting cultivar is lost and the rootstock takes over, producing poor fruit. With Canadian dwarf sour cherries their size is a result of hybridization and they grow back from their roots true to form.

A common mistake made by first-time growers is believing the fruit is ready when it turns red and other cherries are being picked. The cherries typically need a few more weeks of ripening. Though the cherries can contain twice the sugar of a sour cherry they have all the tartness as well, especially when they aren't very ripe. The University of Saskatchewan suggests that the cherries can ripen over a long period, turning from a bright red to almost black color and developing much more sugar and juiciness. With this window of harvest the cherries can be harvested early for canning like typical sour cherries, or late for fresh eating and juicing like sweet cherries.

Birds notice the cherries as soon as they turn red so be prepared with a well-planned netting system. Rodents also love the bark of cherry trees and will quickly girdle a tree. I'm always surprised at how many voles my cats catch during the dead of winter, and I appreciate their effort, as this is often when the rodents do the most damage.

Canadian dwarf sour cherry is slow to mature, with mid-size

harvests in year four. In year five the plants really put on the fruit and yields, which thereafter can be up to 40 pounds per bush. The trees are self-pollinating, but like most stone fruit it is advisable to plant multiple varieties for better pollination.

There are several varieties of Canadian dwarf sour cherry currently available; 'Carmine Jewel', 'Crimson Passion', and 'Romeo and Juliet'. If you would like to learn more about these varieties visit the University of Saskatchewan site, <http://www.fruit.usask.ca>.

Bird netting is a must if you don't want to share most of your harvest. Birds will often just pick the ripe berries and you might not even realize the berries are ripening as they disappear every morning before you see them. A good method is to use netting with small cells and try to drape the net off of the plants as the crafty birds will manipulate the net to sneak any berries within reach. Soda cans, bottles, or tennis balls on the tops of bamboo stakes work well as a frame that can extend over the bushes.

JUNEBERRY

Juneberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) is a mid-size bush that produces berries which look similar to blueberries. The plant is also known as the Saskatoon or sarvis berry. In Canada, juneberry pro-



A two-year-old 'Indigo Gem' haskap plant. This variety has an extended bloom period, making it suitable as a pollinator. Haskap fruit have an oblong shape and a deep blue purple color.



This juneberry cultivar, 'Lee 8', has set a few fruit in its second year.



These haskap, dwarf sour cherry and Aronia plants have triple protection with deer fence, bird netting and weed mat.

duction and wild picking are a near \$20 million industry. However, in the USA there is virtually no commercial production.

Juneberry plants are quite hardy and grow native in the Rocky Mountains; many people have seen or sampled them in the wild. People often do not care for the pea-size wild berries, describing them as dry, mealy or even woody. The wild plants and berries are also sometimes infected with unsavory-looking fungal pathogens.

However, domesticated plants are a different matter as cultivars

have been selected for disease resistance as well as fruit quality. The berries are large and juicy with some cultivars producing berries nearly the size of small grapes. The berries are sweet and have a pleasant but mellow flavor. These berries are great for using like a blueberry without the blueberry taste that some people don't enjoy. The fruit are suitable for fresh eating, freezing, and processing.

Juneberry plants have a medium stature, growing up to 10 feet. After reaching full maturity in four to five years each plant will yield up to 15 pounds. Berries ripen in mid-June to July. The plants are self-pollinating but benefit from crosspollination.

Juneberries are common native plants and are a culturally significant plant to many Native American cultures, as the fruit have been commonly utilized in their diets and pemmican recipes. Wildlife is also quite happy to utilize them. Deer will munch the tops, rodents will girdle, dig up and fell the trunks, and birds will make off with what berries remain. For these reasons it is important to be vigilant in your protection of the plants. Detering the wildlife with fences, bird netting, and trunk protection will yield the best results.

Juneberries are also susceptible to diseases like fire blight and cedar-apple rust carried by other plants. You might consider planting Juneberries in areas devoid of these other disease-bearing plants, which include apple, chokecherry, and cedar trees. Other cultural controls which will help ensure success include removal and disposal of dead and infected plant materials, keeping fertility ample but not high, and the timely use of horticultural oils to suppress pests and disease.

ARONIA

Aronia (x *Sorbaronia mitschurinii*), or black chokeberry, is a hybrid of wild aronia (*Aronia melanocarpa*) and European mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*). The fruit are quite popular in Europe and are gaining popularity domestically due to their extremely high antioxidant content. In fact, aronia has the highest antioxidant content of any fruit yet tested, nearly three times that of blueberries.

Don't confuse the plant with native chokecherries (*Prunus virginiana*). Aronia is not as astringent as chokecherries, a person can eat a good number of aronia berries raw. Also, aronia does not contain pits so the entire berry may be eaten. I quite enjoy the berries, which have a unique sweet, slightly tart flavor I feel falls somewhere between wild and domestic berries. The fruit makes a very dark juice and is used commercially to darken beverages. They also make a very lovely, warm red wine. In fact, I've taken to calling the berries "red-wine berries," as in my mind they are reminiscent of a tannic Malbec.

Aronia is extremely hardy in zone 3. The plant flowers late in the year, avoiding the damage of early frosts. It is a fast grower, putting on 1 to 2 feet per year to reach heights of 8 to 10 feet. Aronia makes an attractive landscaping shrub in the fall as the leaves darken to tones of crimson and purple similarly to the fruit.

The plants do not need a pollinator as they are self-fruitful. In



These Aronia plants are about 5 years old. They will each yield up to 20 pounds of incredibly dark purple fruit.

their second year they will yield up to a couple of pounds of berries, after five or six years their yield maxes out around 20 pounds per plant. The plants can live over 20 years.

Common cultivars include 'Nero' and 'Viking'. 🐝

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