

GROWING CHERRIES

For me, summer has really arrived when plump, juicy cherries hit the markets and roadsides around Canberra. And who hasn't dangled them over their ears, been excited by the discovery of a 'triple-bunger' or played rapid-fire seed-spitting games with their siblings?

Cherries are closely related to apricots, plums, nectarines and peaches, which are collectively known as drupes, or more commonly known as stone fruit. They belong to the *Prunus* genus of the rose family. Only a few members of the genus have edible fruit, the best known being the sweet cherry (*Prunus avium*) and the sour cherry (*Prunus cerasus*). Of these two, there are hundreds of varieties

The first commercial orchard in Australia was planted in Young in 1878. The Young and Orange districts produce around 70% of NSW's cherries and account for around half the national harvest. NSW cherries are also grown in the Batlow-Tumut region, around Cowra, Canowindra and Forbes and in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.

Production is greatly influenced by rainfall - drought affects yield, size and timing and rain at harvest causes splitting.

Growing cherries

Cherries do best in sheltered areas with light rainfall. They grow on most soil types except heavy clay, as long as the soil is friable and well drained. They don't like having wet feet, so slightly sloping country with deep, well-structured topsoil is ideal. A winter chill is required for a good crop.

Cherry varieties cross easily, so buds from a healthy, productive tree are often grafted to a rootstock selected for a good growing habit. Care should be made to plant cross-fertile varieties, and those with similar flowering times together to assist pollination.

Management includes pruning (summer pruning is thought to be the most beneficial), weed control and timely fertilising and watering (www.agric.nsw.gov.au for details).

Trees can grow to 12 m and with good management, they'll be around for a while. They begin to produce significant crops from about 6 years and can continue to produce fruit for around 100 years.

Problems

Cherries are prone to a number of pests and diseases. In our region (Southern Tablelands), bacterial canker is the most serious problem, particularly in colder and wetter areas. They are also susceptible to viral diseases and insect pests, and have their own slug (cherry slug) and aphid (cherry aphid). Information on dealing with these pests is available from NSW Agriculture.



As they are one of the first fruits to appear in spring, cherries are regular targets for birds, particularly in early-maturing varieties. Netting is considered the best form of control.

Harvesting

Cherries trees produce white or pink flowers in spring. Depending on location, cherries are ready for harvest around 6-8 weeks later. Cherries are generally picked by hand, with the stems attached to prolong shelf life.

Peak season for cherries in our part of the world is early-mid summer. Cherries don't ripen after harvest, so they need to be picked very close to maturity, and are therefore don't travel well and are highly perishable.

Choosing and using

Cherries range in skin colour from glossy red to almost black, and in flesh colour from pinky cream to cerise to black. At the markets, look for bright, glossy, fat fruit with green stems. Avoid bruised or soft fruit and small, hard fruit - the former will spoil quickly and the latter will lack flavour and juice.

Eat as soon as possible after purchase (this is no great hardship). They can be stored for a few days in a paper or plastic bag in the fridge. Wash just before use. They can be eaten raw, baked in pies and tarts, stewed, poached, preserved, glazed and jammed. There are even commercially available cherry pitters.

Not only do they taste great, cherries are a good source of vitamin A, B-complex and C, iron, potassium, sodium and dietary fibre. Herbalists suggest that they are good for stimulating kidneys and colon and recommend the juice to relieve symptoms of gout and arthritis. And they make great earrings.

References and further reading

- NSW Agriculture AgFacts: Cherry growing in NSW (Jeremy Bright and Sue Marte)