

European Bird Cherry

Prunus padus L.

Alternate Names

Mayday tree, Maybush

Description

European bird cherry is a small deciduous tree that grows to 15 to 30 feet high. Leaves are oval and dark green with 2 glands where the stalk joins the blade and often with a tuft of hair where each vein joins the midrib. Leaves have long stalks, up to 4 inches, and are elliptic to obovate and sharply serrate. Small, strongly aromatic white flowers, $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch long, are held in cylindrical spikes at various angles, often drooping. The fruit is a black cherry that is highly prized by birds.

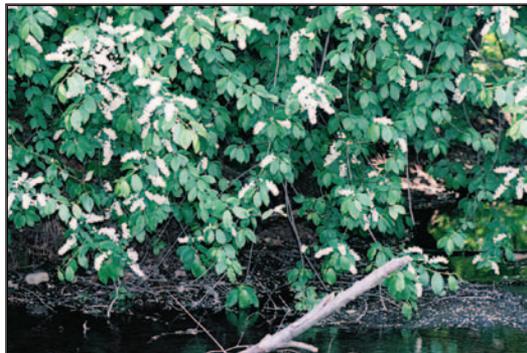


National Park Service photo
by Jeff Heys

Similar Species

The species most easily mistaken for European bird cherry in Alaska is Canada red cherry, a cultivar of *Prunus virginiana* L. that holds its flower spikes more upright than those of European bird cherry. The two species are easily distinguished once the foliage of Canada red cherry turns red in July. Other species that might be mistaken for European bird cherry in Alaska are sweet cherry (*Prunus avium* L.) and black chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana* L. var. *melanocarpa* (A. Nels.) Sarg.).

Sweet cherry is distinguished from European bird cherry by its generally larger size, the larger size of the teeth on the leaf margin, and flowers that are larger and arranged in clusters rather than a raceme. Black chokecherry can



USDA Forest Service photo
by Michael Shephard

be distinguished by its leaves that have entire rather than serrate margins.

Ecological Impact

The fruits of European bird cherry are highly desirable to birds. Impacts on ecological processes are unknown, however it is successfully spreading along streams in Anchorage amidst native trees and shrubs, suggesting alteration of riparian community composition. Moose will browse the tree but often do not, further increasing its dominance over the native birch, willow, and cottonwood. The tree seems to germinate readily along riparian corridors and is often the primary, if not the only, species of saplings seen in the understory of greenbelt forests in Anchorage.



*USDA Forest Service photo
by Michael Shephard*

Biology and Invasive Potential

European bird cherry sets seed in most years, with an interval between large seed crops of 1 to 3 years. Seeds are very abundant (GRIN 2004) but viable for less than 1 year. Vegetative reproduction occurs by root suckers. European bird cherry is usually pollinated by flies, although self-pollination occurs regularly if insects fail to visit a plant. Seed viability averages 74% with variable germination rates, and seeds require 2 to 4 weeks of warm weather prior to 18 weeks of temperatures less than 40°F for germination. Seeds are widely distributed by birds that eat the fruits in large quantities. It is suited to coarse and medium textured soils with pH levels ranging from 5.0 to 7.0 and has a low tolerance for anaerobic and saline soils. It can withstand temperatures to -33°F, requires 110 frost-free days for reproduction, and is not drought- or shade-tolerant (GRIN 2004).

Distribution and Abundance

European bird cherry is native to Scotland and northern England and Wales and is the most northerly distributed *Prunus* species in Europe. It is commonly cultivated as an ornamental tree in southern Alaska and is colonizing several streams in Anchorage and the Chena River in Fairbanks (M. Shephard, pers. comm. 2004). It is not widely distributed in North America but also occurs in Illinois, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Ontario, and New Brunswick.

Management

Control methods have not been tested for European bird cherry. One method likely to be effective would be to fell trees with a chainsaw and apply herbicide to cut stumps to prevent regrowth from root and stump suckers. Use only herbicides approved for frill application.

Notes

This small tree is from Europe and is known as *hegg* in Norway, where it is thought to have originated. The bark has been used for traditional fabric dyeing.



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by Michael Shephard