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How to Grow Cherries: The Complete Guide



Cherries are much better picked off a branch at home than from the supermarket.

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Planting, Growing, and Harvesting Cherries

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)
Last Updated: April 10, 2025



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Cherry trees are gorgeous all year long, from their spring blossoms to their luscious fruit in midsummer. Learn how to grow and harvest

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About Cherries

- **Sweet cherries** are the variety most often found in markets. They have a thick, rich, and almost plum-like texture. Sweet cherries grow in hardiness Zones 5 to 7; they are self-sterile and best for an orchard or a large garden. You'll need at least two or three trees, as they'll need to pollinate each other. If space is limited, consider the dwarf self-pollinating cultivar 'Stella'.
- **Sour cherries** are not usually eaten raw, but are widely used for preserves and other cooking uses. Sour cherries are much smaller than sweet cherries and all varieties are self-fertile. They grow in Zones 4 to 6.

Cherry trees generally start bearing fruit in their fourth year; dwarf trees bear fruit a year earlier. One mature, standard-size tart or sweet cherry tree will produce 30 to 50 quarts of cherries each year; a dwarf tree, about 10 to 15 quarts.

Plant cherry trees in early spring or late fall (when the ground is soft and has a higher moisture content) in a sunny site with good air circulation and deep, well-drained soil.

with wildlife-safe netting to protect the fruit from birds.

Read Next

- [Unusual Fruit and Fruit Trees to Grow](#)
- [Stone Fruit: How to Grow Your Own](#)
- [How to Grow Plums: The Complete Guide](#)

PLANTING

Plant cherry trees in a sunny site with good air circulation; avoid planting near larger trees or buildings that will shade the cherries. Ideally, cherry trees should get at least 6 hours of sunlight each day.

Cherry trees do best in deep, well-draining soil that has a pH of 6.0-7.0.

Space sweet cherries 35 to 40 feet apart; dwarfs, 5 to 10 feet apart. Space tart cherries 20 to 25 feet apart; dwarfs, 8 to 10 feet apart.

When to Plant Cherry Trees

- Plant cherries in the late fall or early spring (when the ground is soft and has a higher moisture content).
- When selecting sweet cherries, make sure

How to Plant Cherry Trees

- Trees on standard rootstock should be planted with the graft union a few inches below the soil level. Trees on dwarf rootstock should be planted with the graft union several inches above the soil level, which will prevent the graft from growing its own roots and bypassing the rootstock.
- When planting fan-trained trees, construct the necessary supports before planting. Plant fans only 12 to 15 feet apart.
- For bareroot trees, place the rootstock on a small mound of soil in the center of the planting hole, and spread the roots down and away, trying not to bend the roots. Backfill with soil.
- For container-grown trees, first remove the rootball and set the tree on its side; cut through any pot-bound or encircled roots with shears. Don't cover the top of the root-ball.

Check out this video to learn more about how to plant a bare-root fruit tree:

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...nt a Bare-root Fruit Tree Step by Step



GROWING

- There is no difference in care between sour and sweet cherries.
- Apply mulch around the tree to retain moisture, but leave several inches of bare earth around the trunk.
- Drape netting over trees to protect the fruit from birds.
- Water routinely in dry areas.
- Thinning the fruit is not necessary for cherry trees, as they typically thin naturally in early summer.
- Prune trees every year in late winter to encourage the growth of new fruiting wood. Don't prune in the fall.
- Fertilize early in spring with a low-nitro-

as necessary (check soil fertility by testing the soil) until cherries are harvested. Do not fertilize after mid-summer, as new growth needs time to harden off before fall and winter.

Types

Sweet Cherries

- Early - 'Black Tartarian'
- Midseason - 'Bing'
- Late - 'Stella'

Sour Cherries

- Early - 'Early Richmond'
- Midseason - 'Montmorency'
- Late - 'Meteor'

HARVESTING

- Pick fruits only when FULLY ripe (dark red, black, yellow); the sugar content rises the few days before fully ripened.
- Be ready to harvest within a week's time. Eat or cook immediately.
- Pick fruits when firm if they are to be frozen.
- Be sure to pick with the cherry stem so

- Hand-picking may injure the shoots and cause infection; cut the stalks with scissors.
- Remember that cherry trees do not typically bear fruit until their fourth year. Thereafter, they should produce about 30 to 50 quarts of cherries each year.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

Birds are common pests, especially with sweet cherries (versus tarts). To avoid bird damage, you can drape nylon mesh netting over dwarf trees, but it's difficult to cover the larger standard-size sweet cherry tree. Distracting objects such as pie pans can help.

Another solution is to grow a fruit tree nearby that will ripen before and during the cherry season, such as mulberry trees. (Avoid planting 'Illinois Everbearing' mulberry which ripens too late.)

Learn more about [keeping birds](#) out of the garden.

Other pests that attack cherries include fruit flies, apple maggots, peach tree borers, and caterpillars (specifically the larvae of the plum curculio). Ask your local garden center about approved sprays.

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Brown rot and cherry leaf spot affect both tart and sweet cherries. Black knot and [pow-](#)

WIT AND WISDOM

A cherry year, a merry year.

There is a famous myth that President George Washington cut down a cherry tree and then admitted his wrongdoing to his father. This myth was invented by a biographer of President Washington, who hoped to display his honesty. We still think it's a great idea to commemorate [President's Day](#) with a delicious [cherry pie recipe](#)!

RECIPES

NO-LIE CHERRY PIE

RHUBARB-CHERRY CRUNCH

CHERRY BERRY PIE

FRUIT

Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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COMMENTS

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Barbara Lee Johnson (not verified) 10 months 1 week ago

I brought a house two years ago that had cherry trees. The cherries fall off the trees before they are ripe. I think they have been neglected. I have been watering them and have put steer manure around them for two years but the cherries still fall off

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[REPLY](#)

Teresa A Bacon (not verified) 2 years 2 months ago

My ? is and haven't asked locally why. But say i go to shop for tree, its been sitting there for maybe a couple yrs, more, and i still have to wait 3-4 yrs? Why is that? thank you

[REPLY](#)

The Editors 2 years 2 months ago

It's more so about the age of the tree than how long it's been in the ground. If the tree has been sitting in a container for several years and has been taken care of appropriately, it will likely be ready to fruit within a year or so of planting (it still needs a little time to settle in, however).

[REPLY](#)

Mike Hutchko (not verified) 3 years ago

My biggest problem is I live out in the country and if it isn't possums, raccoons or birds, I never get any

the trunk; chicken wire around the tree; hanging silver streamers on several branches; even tried putting net bags over the fruit on the branches but nothing seems to keep these critters away from me harvesting my own. One year, we were watching the berries as they got a little yellow with a tinge of pink and the next day every last cherry was already gone. VERY FRUSTRATING!

REPLY

Josh Widner (not verified) 1 year 11 months ago

We grew apples and peaches as well as lots of veggies when I was a kid. My Dad owned 2 acres of suburban land, half of which was forested. He never liked our cat. But, that was because he only saw the unpleasant part of cleaning her box when she wanted to stay inside during the cold of the winter. He never realized how critical she was, in the summer, to his harvests in the fall.

For the first 16 years of the cat's life, we always managed to harvest a plentiful crop every single year. That's because the cat would catch critters that eat fruit and

in the springtime. The size of the mother critter didn't really matter because she didn't go after the adult critters. She cleaned out their young. There is always a period of time when baby critters are left alone, while their mother goes out to get them food. That is when the little killing machines, otherwise known as cats, strike!

When our cat finally became geriatric, her hunting skills waned. Critter numbers, given the abundance of hiding places for them in the forest, began to explode. That little cat died at the age of 18 and a half. And, during the last two years of her life, we didn't manage to harvest even one whole fruit. All the fruits were bitten and eaten, in whole or part, by one animal or another. As to the veggies, well, the rabbits made off with all the lettuce, celery and other greens. They didn't bother with tomatoes, peppers, or beans, so we managed harvest those even without the help of our cat. But, nothing else.

My advice is to adopt a few cats. The number will depend on the size of your property. We had 2 acres. and one cat was

REPLY

The Editors 3 years ago

We feel and understand your pain. One of our editors planted a peach tree and had a similar experience. It sounds like you've tried all of the usual and recommended techniques. We found an idea from the folks who grow Bings best—cherry orchardists in Washington state. Here's the solution (Hint: it involves sugar): <https://www.goodfruit.com/sugar-sours-birds-on-eating-valuable-cherry-crops/> You might also reach out to the source of this information for more advice or ideas.

REPLY

Wendy Webb (not verified) 3 years 1 month ago

We have a lot of roots that grow up out of the ground from the cherry tree(suckers). My husband is thinking rototilling the whole base under the tree would help. I am worried about rototilling hurting the roots. It is a small rototiller. Any thoughts?

Anne (not verified) 2 years 10 months ago

Prune the sucker-roots to the ground; as soon as the roots appear; do not rototiller; REPLANT TREE IN A DEEPER SOIL or ADD alot TOP SOIL around Tre;

REPLY

Eleanor (not verified) 3 years ago

I had both a Nanking and a Hansen bush cherry in AR. Both set cherries very well. Did they pollinate each other? My grand-kids loved them

REPLY

Heather (not verified) 3 years 3 months ago

Will a Nanking Bush cherry tree pollinate a Carmine Jewel dwarf tree?

REPLY

MORE COMMENTS



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