

Care Sheet for Sour Cherries

Care upon Arrival

Potted plants can be planted in the soil at anytime of the year, as long as the ground is not frozen. If it is hot summer, the plants will need to be watered twice weekly if it is dry. If you are not ready to plant yet, the plant should be fine kept near a front door where it can get light and you can keep an eye on it. Keep the potted plant watered, making sure the soil stays moist, but not sodden or overly soaked (don't leave it in standing water in a bucket or pond for more than a few hours or its roots will begin to die). If any part of the plant is broken from shipping, it is best to prune that piece off where the break occurred. Make sure to NOT cut a fruit tree off below its graft union (marked with a splotch of paint)—below this is only rootstock which will not produce quality fruit. If the plant is broken below the graft union, immediately splint and wrap it so it is rejoined, using scraps of plastic bag and rubber bands, or any type of tape should work. Using a piece of a stick and taping that well below and above the break should hold things in place until the wound heals over.

General Information

Cherries are a very beautiful and easy to grow fruit tree! They can do well even in less fertile soils but do not tolerate standing water around their roots. Sour cherries like as much sun as they can get, but can fruit even with half-day's worth of sun. Sour cherries are self-fertile. Blooms occur in the early spring, covering the tree in beautiful white! Fruit follows the blooms. Ripening time is usually in early summer. Even though they are called "sour" in their name, sour cherries are actually delightful to eat fresh off of the tree. When fully ripe, they have a great sweet-tart flavor and are full of juice! They are also great in jams, jellies, pies, tarts and other baked goods. Dried cherries are sublime.

Planting

Our sour cherry trees are on a seedling Mahaleb rootstock, and can reach up to 16' in height and 14' breadth at maturity. The variety 'Northstar' is an exception, and reaches only 8'-10' high. Plan for this mature size when you pick your planting spot (it's very easy to forget your tiny tree will get to be this big). Keep 12'-16' of space (6-8' for 'Northstar') between sour cherries at planting time. Try to find a spot that stays above pooling water in heavy rains, and if you don't have such a spot, create a "hill" of soil approximately 3' wide by 10" tall to plant the tree on. If your soil is very compacted from construction or lots of walking traffic, take some time to loosen the soil (with a spade or garden fork) to 24" deep by 3' diameter before planting your tree. When you do plant it, carefully dig a hole that is the same size as the pot. Slide the tree out carefully from its pot and set it into the hole you dug, slightly below the level it was in the pot. Now lightly firm the soil around the tree with your hands or foot so the plant can't rock back and forth easily. Always apply mulch of some sort (see below). Now with a hose or watering can, water the tree generously. Make sure the tree gets a good watering twice a week for its first year in the ground, either from a rain, or from you watering if it does not rain. Do not water if the weather is already wet! This can drown out the roots

from too much water. In wetter parts of the country, it is good to have the tree planted on a slight mound so its roots can be above standing water during torrential rains. Conversely, plant fruit trees in basins if you live in a dry part of the country.

Pruning

Sour cherries will bear fruit just fine if not pruned, but they will eventually look gangly and the fruit can be harder to harvest. Pruning cherries is best done in late winter when the buds are just beginning to swell (February thru early March here in southern Indiana). In the first and second years, prune very little if any live wood off, but prune off any dead branches and certainly any growth below the graft line (the rootstock can very quickly outgrow the grafted part in the first few years). After the tree gets some size to it, prune out only the thickest growth where the tree seems to be “clogged up”—these areas will cease to produce much fruit and can spread fruit rots to the rest of the good fruit. Otherwise, cherries respond very well to different styles of pruning and you should mainly aim to prune for good looks so you can enjoy it!

Fertilizing and Mulching

Never put fertilizer into the hole when you are planting the tree! It is best to wait until the second year to begin fertilizing fruit trees. Mulching right away with material like wood chips, bark mulch, grass clippings, spoiled hay, straw, even shredded paper will do wonders for your tree (synthetic mulches like rubber or plastic will only keep the soil moist). Mulch keeps the soil moist during dry spells, wicks the water away during wet weather, and breaks down into wonderful black rich humus that enriches the soil. No rototilling needed! Just keep adding more mulch material each year, starting with a 3' diameter circle at planting, and expanding the circle so it falls at the edges (drip line) of the branches as they grow outward. Keep a clear area of about 3" around the trunk, so rots and rodents do not nibble the wood. Starting the second year, it is good to add some sort of fertilizer on top of the ground (or old mulch) before you add new mulch. Keep the fertilizer in a circle near the drip line of the tree—this is where its feeder roots are. Manure is best, as it has a fairly balanced nutrient load, and it encourages soil life. Only apply a layer 1" thick, in a 1' wide band, and put mulch on top of this. The soil life will do the rest of the work incorporating it into the ground and making it available to plants. If using synthetic fertilizer, always go with the instructions on the package. For a tree treat, find some kelp meal at a local garden center or from an organic farmer, and sprinkle some of this around the drip line every 3-5 years. Note: if you are using hay with a good clover or alfalfa in it, there is no need to add manure! Watch your tree to see if you are using too much or too little fertilizer. It will send out water sprouts over 24" long if you are using too much (and it won't fruit very much) and it will stay very small, growing little or not at all if you are using too little. If you have very acidic soils, adding a little lime will help problems as well.

Fruiting

Sour cherries need very little attention or none at all to produce good fruit. Inevitably, some fruits will have some insect damage on them, but they are still fine to eat, and usually the bulk of the crop is flawless. If you want to avoid insect damage, I recommend using a natural

product called Surround™, a wettable clay that you spray on the tree every two weeks, starting just after the flowers fall off the tree. Birds are often noted for stealing cherries off of trees just as they ripen. My experience has shown that this is usually a problem of not harvesting soon enough—if you seen the birds getting your cherries, go out there right away and pick the tree! If they are eating the fruit before it is ripe to eat, many people have had the best luck with plastic bird netting available from garden stores. Cover the tree just as cherries are showing the slightest red color, and remove it promptly after harvest so the tree doesn't grow through the netting. You can reuse the same netting for many years this way. If you have a problem with the fruit rotting, try pruning the tree well the next year to open it up to more sun and wind flow. Stella Otto's *The Backyard Orchardist* is a good book for more details on growing many different fruit trees including cherries.