DELICIOUS


TREE


ALTERNATE LEAVES


MID TO LATE SUMMER

Black Cherry –OR– Rum Cherry

Prunus serotina

HABITAT: Sun-dappled hardwood and mixed-wood forests; edge habitat.

GROWTH: A tall, stately native tree, up to 90 feet high and 50 feet wide but typically smaller; when young, may appear as a small shrub. Young stems are reddish-brown or gray, with prominent lenticels (breathing pores); older bark is dark gray, with curling, scaly plates.

LEAVES: Smooth, glossy leaves are oval, with tapered bases and long, pointed tips; edges are finely toothed. Leaves are 2 to 5 inches long, one-half to one-third as wide, and dark green above, paler below. The base of the midrib on the underside has fine reddish hairs (visible with a lens); this is one of the easiest ways to positively identify a black cherry. Leaves grow alternately on long, pale petioles (stemlets).

FRUIT: Round, reddish-black drupes grow in racemes (long clusters of multiple fruits) from leaf axils. Fruits are about ⅓ inch in diameter; they are glossy but opaque. Fruit stemlets and the fruiting stalk are often reddish-purple. Black cherries are sweet and delicious, but the pit is fairly large in proportion to the flesh so the fruit is usually juiced, or pulped to make jam. There are no toxic look-alikes that are large trees, but there are several woody shrubs with inedible black fruits that could be confused with black cherries; please see below.

SEASON: Black cherries ripen in mid to late summer.

COMPARE: Chokecherries (pgs. 148) have edible fruits that grow in racemes, but leaves are proportionally wider and lack the hairs on the midrib. Buckthorn (pgs. 278, 282, 294) have mildly toxic black fruits; leaves of some are somewhat similar, but the fruits grow singly or in clusters from the leaf axils rather than in racemes.

NOTES: Black cherry leaves and pits contain hydrocyanic acid, a cyanide-producing compound. The leaves and pits should never be eaten, and care should be taken to avoid crushing cherry pits when juicing the fruits. Cooking or drying eliminates the harmful compound.

green = key identification feature