



Plants for Birds: Chokecherry

- **Scientific Name:** *Prunus virginiana* (Rosaceae Family)
- **Height:** Typically 10-20 feet, occasionally up to 30 feet
- **Hardiness:** Cold hardy to Zone 2
- **Wildlife Value:** Berries, browse, cover and nesting sites

Chokecherry is an all-star plant for birds and other wildlife! This plant is extremely hardy, drought-tolerant, and it bears abundant crops of bright red to deep purple berries in August and September which are devoured by a wide variety of birds and mammals. Dense clusters of chokecherry also provide excellent cover and nesting habitat for birds. The autumn foliage colors of yellow and orange can brighten our gardens.

Chokecherries flower from May to June producing dazzling racemes of white blossoms which attract many insect pollinators including butterflies and moths. The berries are the important food source and people have observed more than 70 species of birds feeding on the berries including catbirds, jays, kingbirds, thrushes, robins, grosbeak, and grouse as well as voles, mice, fox, squirrel, skunk, bear, moose, etc...and the list continues. Native Americans have used it for centuries as food and medicine. The roots, bark, and hard seeds inside the berries are toxic but are usually only poisonous to cattle and other livestock that eat too much of them. The flesh of the fruit is not toxic and although tart and puckery, if left to ripen and mixed with sugar and cooked, it makes delicious jams and preserves.

Chokecherries are highly resilient and abundant throughout most of the United States and Canada and do well in a variety of different soil, moisture and environmental conditions. Preferring moist, rich, well drained soils and sunshine, they will also tolerate almost any soil type and a wide range of sun or shade. They are so hardy they're often used in the restoration and reclamation of mining areas and construction sites.

For the home garden chokecherries can be propagated by seeds or by cuttings, or bought as shrubs or medium size trees. Usually grown as shrubs, they can be considered weedy as the roots produce rhizomes and they form dense thickets. They are best planted where they have room to spread and not in a manicured bed. The 'Canada Red' cultivar can be grown as a single stemmed small tree. It has attractive reddish purple leaves in the summer adding a colorful contrast in a landscape, yet they produce the same great berries for birds. They seem to produce better fruits if planted in multiples.

Plant this tough, tolerant native in your garden for a variety of color throughout the season and for a prodigious amount of fruit to feed our native birds and wildlife.

- Leslie Eddington