

Invasive Species Profile: Higan Cherry Tree (*Prunus subhirtella*)

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Native Range: Japan (origin)

U.S. Introduction: mid-1800s

Life Cycle: perennial tree

Means of Spreading: fruits, eaten by birds which pass the seeds

Commercially Available: yes, sometimes sold as “weeping cherry”

Control Method: hand-pull seedlings and young plants. Saplings may require mechanical tools, such as a Weed Wrench. Cut down mature trees; continue manually removing new growth until the plant dies.

Good Alternative Species: black cherry (*Prunus serotina*)

Comments: Countless cherry species and hybrids exist throughout the world. Scores of cherry varieties abound in the D.C. area, with their popularity a nod to the Tidal Basin’s fame. Of these trees, some escape cultivation, primarily through avian dispersal: a bird eats the small fruit, deposits the pit in a dropping elsewhere, the seed germinates, and a tree develops. Collectively, most of these “bird cherry trees” currently pose little immediate threat to the local area.

The exception is the Higan cherry (*Prunus subhirtella*), also called weeping cherry and rosebud cherry. First appearing in Japan, Higan cherry is believed to be a mix between two other cherry species because its wild ancestor remains unknown. It came to America as an ornamental tree during the mid-nineteenth century. Whereas Higan cherry is currently of little concern throughout much of the United States, Northern Virginia is an epicenter for this emerging non-native invasive species. Cherries only live for several decades, so their population depends on trees growing quickly and reproducing plentifully. After a bird deposits a cherry pit, the tree grows and matures in several years, at which point it produces more cherries. As birds consume and distribute these cherries, many other second generation cherries drop close to the parent. Wildlife avoid eating the leaves or the pit interiors because both contain potentially lethal doses of cyanide. Deer love eating native tree saplings, such as oaks, but leave the Higan cherries alone. Hundreds to thousands of these young cherries keep growing, especially in clearings once grand old trees eventually die. The forest dynamics are poised to shift in favor of the Higan cherries and other invasive species over native tree species that typify a mature forest.

Environmentally conscientious alternatives to the Higan cherry consist of the native black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), which displays creamy blossoms in May. The small fruits make yummy jam! For pink springtime flowers,



Figure 1. Higan cherry trees are conspicuous during their early April bloom period, before leaves emerge. Here, a young tree flowers with another in the background.



Figure 2. Higan cherry fruits lack much flesh so birds swallow them whole. This image includes the cross-section (inset). The scale bar is 1.0 cm.



Figure 3. Silvery ribbons around the trunk distinguish Higan cherry bark (A). Like many Asian cherry trees, Higan cherries bloom pink flowers with five petals (B). Another name for it is winter-blooming cherry even though it flowers in April along with most other Asian cherries. Fruits soon develop after flowering (C). This photograph also shows the leaf shape and undersides.

chokeberries (*Aronia* sp.) fit the bill! Virginia's native crabapples, especially the southern crabapple (*Malus angustifolia*) and sweet crabapple (*M. coronaria*), produce pink flowers that, unlike cherry blossoms, fill the air with sweet fragrance. People cannot smell cherry blossoms! Products marketed with "cherry blossom" aromas instead often use hyacinth or honeysuckle scents. If an Asian cherry tree is deeply desired, the extra petals in double blossom ornamental varieties inhibit pollination so no fruits develop.

To folks liking flavorful barbecues, save the wood pruned from cherry and apple trees. Add it to the grill in place of hickory or mesquite chips. Fruit tree wood imparts a rich, smoky flavor to the food.

For more information on Higan cherry:

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/recreation/parks/InvasiveExoticPlantsThatThreatenParksinAlexandria.pdf>

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/recreation/parks/NonNativeInvasivePlantsArlington.pdf>

<https://www.invasiveplantatlas.org/subject.html?sub=57555>

<http://arnoldia.arboretum.harvard.edu/pdf/articles/2012-69-4-japanese-flowering-cherries-a-100-year-long-love-affair.pdf>

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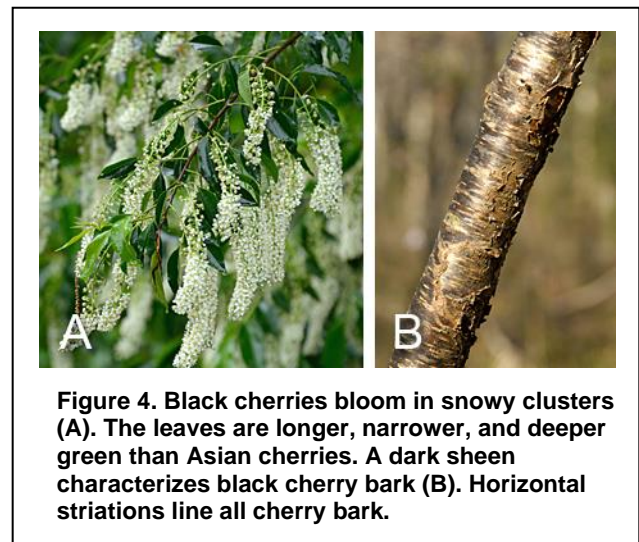


Figure 4. Black cherries bloom in snowy clusters (A). The leaves are longer, narrower, and deeper green than Asian cherries. A dark sheen characterizes black cherry bark (B). Horizontal striations line all cherry bark.