

# NANKING CHERRY



Nanking cherry (*Prunus tomentosa*) is an easy-to-grow shrub with pinkish buds that bloom into fragrant, pale pink or white flowers in early spring. Its showy display is followed by an abundance of tart, scarlet-colored fruit. Although not a native (introduced to the US from China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), it can play a role in our permaculture efforts by making maximum use of gardening spaces: as a shrub, it fits into areas that a standard cherry tree couldn't, and it's so prolific that you can share the fruit with wildlife and still have plenty for yourself.

## ENJOYING THE FRUIT

These red cherries are smaller and a bit softer than the standard ones you'll find in the grocery store and typically more tart. They have the same single seed, or pit.

Nanking cherries can be eaten fresh but are often cooked in pies, jams, and jellies by those who prefer a sweeter taste. Some people also like pickling them or using them for wine. You can also dry the cherries into fruit leather.

Like standard cherries, they don't have a long shelf life but freeze well.

The Nanking cherry's beneficial properties include its high amounts of vitamins C and A, antioxidants, and minerals. Traditionally, the fruit has been used to improve coughs or bronchial problems, and research has been done on its benefits for cancer, gout, and respiratory issues.



## CHOOSING A SITE

Nanking cherries like full sun (at least 6 hours) and well-drained soil. Plan for each multi-stemmed bush to grow to 6–10 feet tall and wide.

The plants are very resilient, tolerating winter temperatures of  $-20^{\circ}\text{F}$  as well as drought and high summer temperatures that summer can bring.

They're lovely enough to be a focal point in your yard. You'll enjoy the many flowers in mid-April, as the blossoms are so dense that they hide the stems.

## PLANTING

Be sure to plant more than one Nanking cherry for cross-pollination. You can plant them as close as 4 feet apart and trim them into a hedge, or you can use them in a mixed-shrub arrangement. Although they look beautiful as a stand-alone plant, in general they'll do better when planted in groups.

## TAKING CARE: WATERING, FEEDING, PRUNING

Water weekly for the first year after installation. After that, you'll need to water only during times of drought.

Each year, add some compost followed by a layer of woodchips in a 2-foot circle around each bush.

Nanking cherries have minimal pruning requirements except for the occasional heading cut to reinvigorate new growth. They are vigorous, adaptable plants that grow 12–24 inches a year.

## AVOIDING PESTS AND DISEASE

Nanking cherries are generally pest- and disease-free in our area. Birds will feast on the cherries along with you, so placing a net over some of the fruit is a good idea, to ensure your harvest.

## HARVESTING

The cherries are easily plucked from their branches after ripening in mid-August. The ripe fruit will stay fresh on the bush for two to three weeks. However, the cherries have a short shelf life, so be prepared to use them within a few days of harvest.

Ben Falk of Whole Systems Design in Vermont shows how the picking is done in a short video about growing what he calls “our easiest, most reliable cherry”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-hcnrsiz5o>

## RESTORING WILDLIFE HABITAT

This dense shrub provides shelter for animals and attracts birds and pollinators. Of course, the birds and other wildlife adore the cherries as well, but there should be plenty to go around for everyone. Again, placing a net over some of the fruit will ensure that you share in the bounty.

