

Chokecherry Jelly, Syrup, and Liqueur

By Lee Lamb

Prep Time: 30 min. | Cook Time: Varies

This past August I popped a just-plucked chokecherry into my mouth for the first time in years. Its sweet-but-astringent taste transported me back to my childhood, when, in late summer, I would feast on the fruits picked from chokecherry bushes scattered throughout our neighborhood. My dad reminded me of the first time he made chokecherry wine back in 1979, and how he had recruited our family and friends to fill a huge cooler with 60 pounds of berries. Dad earned a first place ribbon for his chokecherry wine the following year at the Last Chance Stampede and Fair in Helena.

You'll likely run across *Prunus virginiana* (Latin for "plum from Virginia") almost anywhere in Montana. It grows in grasslands and ponderosa pine woodlands, often along waterways. Because the chokecherry tolerates a variety of soil types and thrives on disturbed soil, it also grows along roadsides, railroad rights-of-way, and fence rows.

The chokecherry can be a shrub or a small tree, growing up to 30 feet tall and 10 to 20 feet wide. Its oval leaves are glossy and dark green with pale undersides and serrated edges. Small, fragrant white flowers appear anytime between May and early July, and grow in dense clusters 3 to 6 inches long. The flowers transform into drooping bunches of small pitted cherries that ripen to a purplish-black color by late summer.

European settlers were the first to use chokecherries to make syrup, jelly, and wine. And as Native Americans

across the northern Rockies and Great Plains demonstrated for thousands of years, the plant's twigs, bark, and even leaves—in small doses—can be beneficial. Indians used bark to treat wounds, cure diarrhea, and calm respiratory problems. They boiled twigs and leaves into a medicinal tea that nursed rheumatism and colds. They also treated cold and canker sores with the cherries, and they pounded the pitted fruits into pemmican. In addition, tribes created pipe stems, bows, and arrows from chokecherry limbs. In some areas the chokecherry's importance to tribes was unparalleled; remnants have been uncovered at more archaeological sites in the Dakotas than those of any other wild plant.

Bear in mind that the chokecherry's bark, stems, seed pits, and especially leaves can be fatal to humans and livestock—particularly cattle and sheep—if the plant has been stressed by drought or frost and then consumed in large amounts (typically 0.25 percent or more of the animal's body weight in an hour or less). Hydrocyanic acid is the culprit. If you eat fresh chokecherries, swallowing a single pit likely won't cause discomfort or illness, but it's still best to spit out all pits.

The fruit itself, however, is safe. It's also delicious—especially when combined with sugar. Listed at right are three easy recipes from the Montana State University Extension Office.

—Montana native Lee Lamb writes from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.



Preparation for all three recipes

Pick only the darkest chokecherries, as they'll be the ripest and sweetest. To extract the juice, clean the cherries and pour into a large pot, adding just enough water to cover. Simmer over low heat, stirring occasionally, until the fruits are soft and have released their juice, about 30 minutes. Gently strain through a jelly bag or cheesecloth-lined colander into a bowl. One gallon of chokecherries yields one quart of juice, which can be frozen for future use.

CHOKECHERRY JELLY

INGREDIENTS

3½ c. juice
½ c. lemon juice
1 t. butter or margarine
1 pkg. pectin (1.75 oz.)
4½ c. sugar

PREPARATION

Follow procedure on pectin package. Put in sterilized jars and seal with lids. Process in a water bath for 8 to 10 minutes.

CHOKECHERRY SYRUP

INGREDIENTS

Use the following portions for any amount:

1 c. juice
1 c. sugar

PREPARATION

Bring to a rolling boil for 15 minutes. Put in sterilized jars and seal with lids. Process in a water bath for 8 to 10 minutes.

CHOKECHERRY LIQUEUR

INGREDIENTS

1 quart chokecherries
4 c. sugar
1 fifth gin or vodka

PREPARATION

Place all ingredients in a glass jar. Shake every day for 30 days. Strain and bottle. The liqueur will taste too sweet at first but will be perfect after six months of unrefrigerated storage.