

# RIPE FOR THE PICKING

There's no time like the present  
for bringing back a once-admired plant  
— the Nanking cherry



Dr. Lee Reich

By Dr. Lee Reich

**N**anking cherry (*Prunus tomentosa*) was introduced into North America in 1882 and was immediately met with enthusiasm. Here was a plant that, even in its wild state, possessed a rare combination of beauty, hardiness and tasty fruit.

Around the turn of the century, USDA plant explorer Frank Meyer shipped a box of 42,000 Nanking cherry seeds from China to the US. Prominent horticulturists of that time were impressed with the plant's potential. One — Ulysses P. Hedrick of the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station — wrote in 1915 that Nanking cherry was "a promising plant for domestication and of particular merit for small gardens and cold regions."

In 1929, Dr. George Slate, also of the New York Station, wrote that "characters exist which, if combined in one individual, will make a worthwhile addition to our list of cultivated plants." And, in 1937, Nanking cherry was one of a handful of plants highlighted in a book by USDA breeder George Darrow under the chapter titled, "Unusual Opportunities in Plant Breeding."

Also in the 1930s, the National Nurseryman devoted almost an entire issue to Nanking cherry. The editor summed up industry sentiment by saying, "...

there is a future ahead for *Prunus tomentosa*. Just who is going to take the final credit, it is hard to say."

So, what happened to this plant's popularity? Today, Nanking cherry is planted only occasionally for its ornamental value and even more rarely for its fruit. Its genetic potential remains untapped. Perhaps the plant's tolerance for rugged climates has caused it to be overlooked for use in places where climates are more congenial. Or perhaps its relative anonymity results from an identity problem; its many common names include Manchu cherry, downy cherry, mountain cherry, Mongolian cherry and Chinese bush cherry.

Nanking cherry is native to central Asia, but has naturalized from Japan and Korea west across China to Turkistan and the Himalayas. The plant is a spreading shrub or small tree, usually wider than its 9- to 15-foot height, and dense with twigs. "Hardy" is an apt designation; this shrub will grow under semiarid conditions and, in a single year, will endure searing summer heat and a snowless winter with temperatures as low as  $-40^{\circ}$ .

This plant provides visual delight three out of the four seasons. Its autumn color is unspectacular, but in winter, the leafless branches display lustrous,

orange-brown bark. (This bark grows increasingly attractive with age, when occasional warty lenticels dot the smooth surface, and paper-thin strips of older bark peel away in vertical curls.)

In spring, Nanking cherry is one of the first shrubs to blossom, with pink buds unfolding to white petals (photo, opposite right). Flowering usually is profuse, since each bud on a 1-year-old shoot yields two flowers, and 2- to 4-year-old shoots produce even larger flower clusters (photo, opposite left).

Early summer brings the fruit, which are ornamental in their own right and usually borne in profusion, despite the early blossom time (sidebar, opposite). Though some self-fertile clones have been identified, Nanking cherry generally requires cross-pollination. Nanking cherry has been cultivated for its fruit in the cold, semiarid regions of Asia; in fact, it is the most common fruit plant in the gardens of the Russian Far East.

In Manchuria, the plant has been grown as a hedge and as a windbreak, as well as for its fruit, even in areas with drifting sand dunes. As Darrow wrote in 1924, "In the rougher portions of Manchuria, [Nanking cherry] occurs only on hillsides, where the bushes usually are 3 or 4 feet high and, in early summer, are red from the abundance of fruit."



Dr. Lee Beach



Dr. Lee Beach

*Opposite: The plump, colorful fruit of Nanking cherry has a lively, delicious flavor.*

*Left: Like fireworks in early spring, the branches of Nanking cherry explode in white blossoms.*

*Above: Each pink bud opens to a pure white flower.*

## A TEMPTING TREAT

Just as the last strawberries are ripening in my garden, I turn my attention to the fruit of the Nanking cherry. Or, I should say, the fruit grabs my attention. Ripened to a brilliant red, the cherries seem to jump out from among the soft, green leaves.

Nanking cherry fruit usually are about 1/2 inch across, although some plants produce fruit up to 1 inch across. The cherries have a meaty texture; a sprightly, true cherry flavor; and a single cherrylike pit. Although most Nanking cherry plants bear red fruit, some produce pink or even white fruit (photo, opposite).

The flavor also varies; some seedlings produce fruit that taste like cultivated tart cherries, while others have fruit that is closer in flavor to cultivated sweet cherries. I have tasted some Nanking cherries that are better than others, but never have I tasted one whose flavor I did not enjoy.

In Russia and North America, there has been a limited amount of breeding of Nanking cherry for its fruit. Besides working with the pure species, Russian breeders have produced hybrids between Nanking cherry and apricot, Nanking cherry and plum, and other combinations.

Among the most promising hybrids have been the ones made between Nanking cherry and another very hardy cherry, *P. besseyi* (Western sand cherry).

Most North American cultivars were developed to

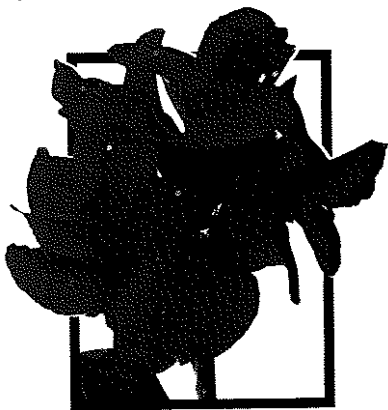
withstand the climate of the Upper Midwest. From Canada in 1938 came 'Drilea', so named because of its adaptation to dry leas (pastures). 'Eileen' was another cultivar from Canada — a hybrid with Western sand cherry that, unfortunately, proved to be a poor yielder and very susceptible to brown rot. 'Baton Rouge' was a similar hybrid; although it produced large fruit, the fruit were poor quality, and yields were low.

In 1949, the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station introduced 'Orient', which was notable mostly for being self-fertile, but also for its tasty, fairly large fruit. Also around the middle of the 20th century, Dr. George Slate of the New York Experiment Station introduced two superior clones, 'Slate' and 'Monroe'.

When ripe, the Nanking cherry fruit are ill-suited for commercial use. They are too soft for shipping and have a short shelf life. However, baskets or branches laden with the fruit have been sold in markets in Manchuria. Nanking cherries would be superb in cherry pie, but the fruit is so small that pitting becomes tedious. At least the stems do not have to be removed, though, since they remain attached to the branches at harvest.

The best way to enjoy Nanking cherry fruit is to simply walk up to a plant, strip the fruit right off the branch and pop it into your mouth. Or, if you wish, put a few into a bowl to bring inside for dessert. Either way, they are a delightful treat.

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Summer also clothes Nanking cherry in soft, green leaves. One of the plant's common names, downy cherry, derives from the downy hair that covers the leaves, the new shoots and — if you look very closely — even the fruit in summer.

**N**anking cherry adapts to a wide climatic range if given full sun and well-drained soil. The limits of cultivation are the coldest portions of Zone 3 and the warmest portions of Zone 6. Growth is also very vigorous (again, given good cultural conditions), amounting to several feet in a single season.

Annual winter pruning is not necessary, but it will bring out the best in this plant. Trimming some branches, removing others entirely and leaving still others untouched allows the remaining branches to be quickly dried by the sun and by breezes after rain or snow. This method of pruning stimulates a steady supply of young, fruitful branches each year. In lieu of such meticulous pruning, a row of plants can be sheared as a hedge.

Nanking cherries thrive for years and produce abundant crops without need for pest control. The plant is reputedly

subject to the usual pests that plague the *Prunus* species — most notably plum curculio, peach tree borer and brood rot. However, Nanking cherry is less affected by these pests than are apricot, peach, cherry and many other cultivated plants in the genus. Occasionally, a whole limb will die back, probably as a result of bacterial canker, but this is rarely a serious problem for a plant that is constantly renewed by vigorous shoots near ground level.

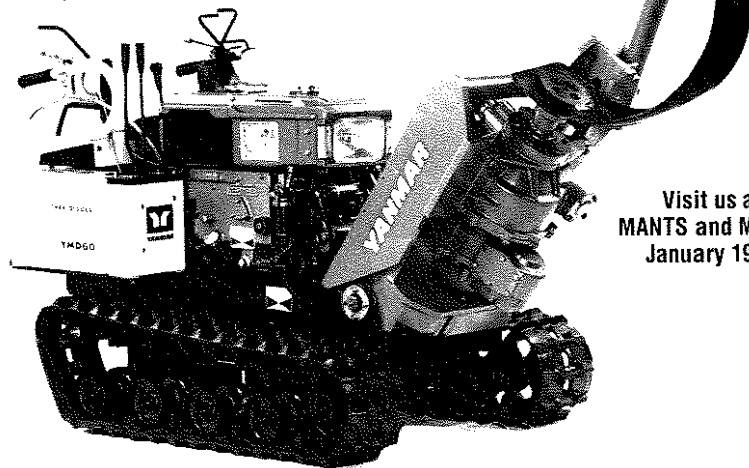
Seed propagation is the usual mode for growing Nanking cherry. Seeds germinate readily as long as they are not allowed to dry completely before sowing. About 98 percent of the seeds should germinate after three months of cool, moist stratification. Flowering and fruiting usually begin by a seedling's third season.

Nanking cherry can be cloned by standard methods. Softwood cuttings root best if they are taken about the time the fruit is ripening, then treated with a rooting hormone (8,000 parts per million indole-3-butyric acid in talc) and kept under mist. Hardwood cuttings should be prepared from dormant, 1-year-old wood cut into 8- to 12-inch lengths.

Grafting methods such as budding and chip budding, which cause the least amount of bleeding, are most suitable

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for Nanking cherry. The following plants do not make satisfactory rootstocks, however: *P. avium*, *P. cerasus montmorency*, *P. mahaleb*, *P. serrulata*, and *P. serotina*. On the other hand, these rootstocks have been used with success: *P. cerasifera*, *P. dulcis*, *P. hortulana*, *P. × domestica* ssp. *insititia*, *P. munsoniana*, *P. nigra*, *P. persica* and *P. ussuriensis*.

*P. davidiana*, a vigorous, drought-tolerant, easily transplanted rootstock, has been used in the Orient and even in the US, but may not be as cold-hardy as Nanking cherry. *P. besseyi* (Western sand cherry) is also compatible, but is more difficult to bud than other species and has the bad habit of suckering.

One of the most satisfactory rootstocks is, of course, Nanking cherry itself — either seedlings or plants grown from cuttings.

Naturally, unless superior clones are identified, clonal propagation is not really necessary. Most seedlings currently on the market are highly ornamental and bear delicious fruit, but breeding and selection could result in higher-quality, more uniform plants.

Nanking cherry is certainly a plant worthy of more widespread cultivation, both for its attractive, tasty fruit and for its three seasons of beauty.

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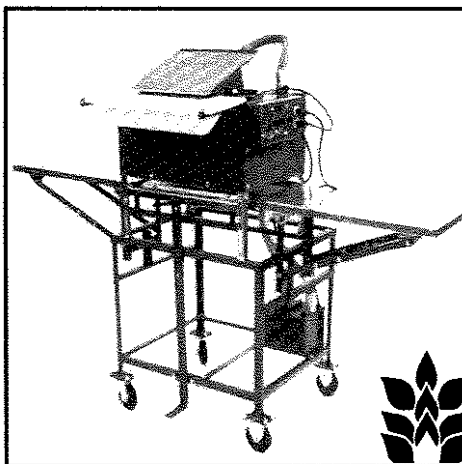
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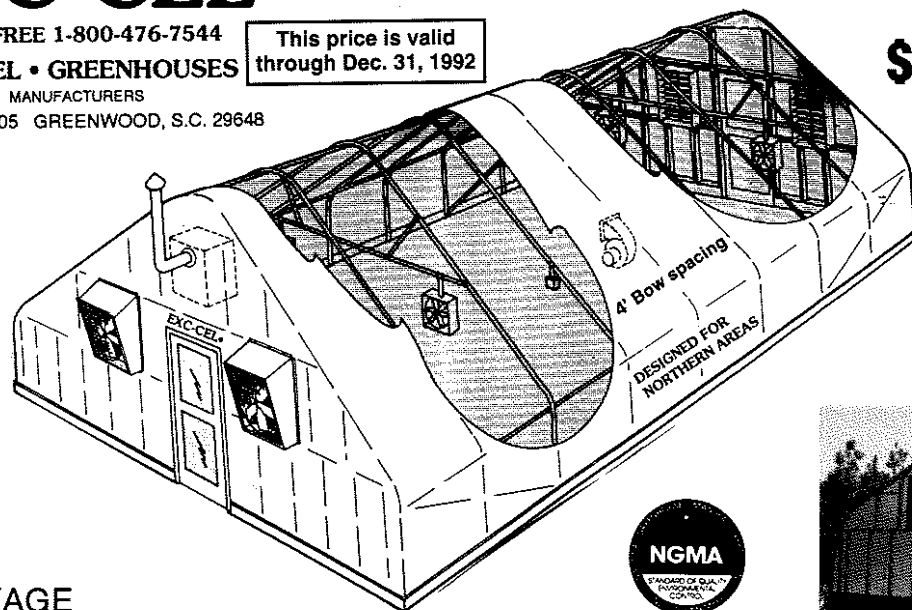
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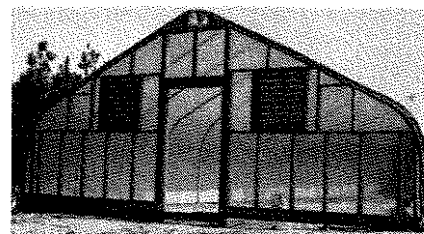
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