

Bittercherry

(Prunus emarginata)



Where does it grow? Bittercherry is widely distributed throughout the western states. It ranges from British Columbia on the north to California on the south and from the Pacific to Montana. Its elevation range is 0-3000 feet in its northern range and 5000-9000 feet in its southern range. It is found most abundantly on well drained, rocky, fertile soils of open slopes or ridge tops. It may be found in flats or along streams. It occurs mostly in the upper ponderosa pine belt where it usually occurs in open brush fields as a pure stand or in association with snowbrush, serviceberry, hawthorn, and manzanita. It generally occurs in open stands but may form dense thickets.

Is it important? Despite the bitter taste of the leaves, twigs, and fruit, the palatability of this plant is rated poor to fair for cattle and fair to good for sheep. This plant and its thickets are often sought by deer and elk for both food and cover.

What does it look like? The general stature of bittercherry may be either tree-like up to 20 feet tall or a spreading shrub 3-10 feet tall. It has a smooth thin bark that is reddish colored on the younger growth and grayish on the older stems. The bark is very bitter and gives off a cherry-like odor when bruised. Bittercherry flowers in April or May and produces bright red cherries in the fall.

Description:

Length of Life--Perennial.

Leaves--Broad, generally oblong, with the margin teeth rounded.
The leaves are very fine pubescent (hairy). The leaf stalk (petiole) and the leaf blade base has 1-4 pinhead-sized glands.

Flowers--Dull white in color and occur in a branched umbrella-like cluster.

Does it look like anything else? Bittercherry may be easily confused with other species of Prunus, especially with Prunus demissa or common chokecherry. The two plants can be distinguished by the following characteristics:

1. Leaf margin - P. emarginata has rounded margin teeth
P. demissa has very sharply pointed margin teeth
2. Leaf shape - P. emarginata has a narrow oblong leaf
P. demissa has a leaf that is broad near the tip
3. Inflorescence shape
P. emarginata flowers occur in an umbrella-like cluster
P. demissa flowers occur in dense, elongated, cylindrical clusters.