

PRUNING CHERRY TREES FOR HEALTH

By Carol Ponchet-Cassidy

In southwestern B. C. the timing for pruning of sweet cherries is determined, to a certain extent by a most troublesome and rampant problem. It is a fungal disease called bacterial canker or “gumming”.

The gum appears in the spring in the crotches of the trees and can also be found on twigs. It can kill blossom buds and blossoms. The fruit itself can be affected, with small, sunken black spots. These spots can also be seen on the leaves, eventually dropping out of the leaf giving a “shot-hole” appearance.

What can be done? Good drainage helps, as cherries don't like chronically wet roots. Maintaining an annual spray program of copper for young unaffected trees may help prevent the infection. On infected trees, you can cut out the gummy dead areas back to clean wood. I like to have a spray bottle of 10% bleach solution handy to continually disinfect my tools and to wash the infected area.

In autumn, after the leaves have fallen, a light dusting of dolomite lime from the trunk to out past the drip-line is helpful in a number of ways. Lime brings calcium which cherry trees enjoy. It also creates a more alkaline environment on the ground surface making it less hospitable to geminating fungal spores that prefer an acidic environment. Lime also helps clayish soils release water held by surface tension.

Because of the prevalence of bacterial canker in our area, timing for pruning becomes an issue worth attention. Contrary to late winter and early spring pruning in other areas of our country, pruning in late summer or early fall is preferred. Cherry trees are among the first of the fruit trees to bear fruit, usually in June. After harvest, the sap slows down dramatically and we see leaves starting to turn about a month later. The wood is much drier and the pruning cuts will dry and heal more quickly, making it less likely for bacterial canker to enter these cuts later in the fall.

Most homeowners seem to prefer the open-vase style of pruning and training for sweet cherries. If the pruning is done each year, it will be relatively light. Remove any crossing, weak or broken branches. The new growth can be cut back by half to two outward facing buds. This will help control the size of the tree.

Cherries have long-lived fruiting spurs (up to 10 – 12 years!), so fruit production can easily be maintained on older branches. If the tree's growth is controlled when young, it's possible to have a sweet cherry tree stabilize at about 12 – 15'. Soil conditions and the amount of sunlight will also affect its size and vigour.

On a final note, sour cherries can also be pruned at this time. They are much less vigorous in their growth, so an annual thinning of weak and/or crowded branches is all that's needed. All stone fruits can be pruned after fruit harvest for many of the same reasons given in this article.

Not for duplication. Property of the author.

Provided by: *Le Coteau Farms Nursery & Garden Centre*

304 Walton Place, Victoria, B. C. (t)250-658-5888 (f)250-658-0545

farms@lecoteau.com ~ www.lecoteau.com