

Laurel cherry *Prunus caroliniana*



Small to medium-sized tree, 1 to 3 m tall, sometimes clipped to form dense hedges. Leaves alternate, evergreen, dark green, shiny, elliptic to elliptic-lanceolate, 5 to 10 cm long, 1.5 to 4 cm wide; leaf margins variable, entire to serrate or denticulate. Flowers small, white, in axillary racemes 1.5 to 3 cm long. Ripe fruit dull black, only slightly fleshy. Georgia to Florida, west to Texas; most common in fence rows, low, moist woods, and maritime forests of Coastal Plain; planted and escaping widely further inland.

Black cherry *Prunus serotina*

Medium-sized tree with dark, smooth bark. Bruised twigs and leaves with a distinctive acrid taste and odor. Leaves alternate, deciduous, light green, elliptic to lanceolate, 6 to 12 cm long, 2 to 5.5 cm wide, crenate to crenate-serrate, with two small glands near the juncture of blade and petiole. Flowers small, white, in terminal racemes 4 to 10 cm long. Ripe fruit black, shiny, juicy, 0.7 to 1 cm long. Distributed throughout the South; most common in fence rows, open woods, and pastures.

Choke cherry *Prunus virginiana*

Shrub with extensive rhizomes, thus often appearing in clumps. Leaves are smaller and have smaller, sharper teeth than *P. serotina*, and ripe fruit are dark red to purple. Uncommon except along streams in Tennessee or in moist places in Oklahoma and Texas.

Toxicity

The toxic principle is hydrocyanic acid (also called prussic acid), which is created by enzymatic action on the glucoside amygdalin. It is present primarily in the wilted leaves of trees that have fallen. The bark and twigs are also toxic.

Ruminants (cattle, sheep, and goats) are most often affected, but single-stomach animals, like the horse, can also be affected. Poisoning may occur in spring, summer, or fall.

Symptoms

Symptoms are difficult breathing, bloat, an anxious expression, moaning, staggering, recumbency, and convulsions before death. Animals may show signs within 15 to 30 minutes after consuming plants containing cyanide and may die within 1 hour of consuming plants. Both the mucous membranes and the blood are bright red in color.

Treatment

Give intravenous injection of sodium nitrite and sodium thiosulfate as early as possible. If necessary, repeat treatments within a few hours.