

2023—A Cherry Good Year



By Cindy Murray

Ever since our sweet Stella cherry tree reached maturity over ten years ago, my husband, Hugh, and I have kept a keen eye on the nightly weather forecasts during the months of April and May. In the event of a frost, we'd cover its lower branches with sheets in hopes of raising its temperature by a few degrees. Otherwise, its blossoms would perish. This past spring, we didn't even bother—the blooms were high above the roofline of our house and out of reach. We assumed all would be lost, as rarely does a spring season pass without a devastating frost here in the Timberline region five miles northeast of Flagstaff.

Incredibly, all was not lost! Our somewhat sheltered, tiny orchard on the fenced-in east side of the house never suffered a lethal frost in the spring of 2023. It was, however, subjected to a freeze of 28 degrees on June 24. Our hopes were dashed—the tiny green cherries would certainly perish. But once again, they kept plugging along, and most even clung to their branches through several days of high winds. Our hopes rose exponentially. We fed it organic fertilizer specially formulated for fruit trees, while diligently weeding and watering the tree.

The cherries gradually grew, morphing into gorgeous burgundy red globes. But there was a problem—how to reach them. We were able to pick a few each day for a while, but soon Hugh had to climb up on a ladder. Oh, those cherries were scrumptious! Now we were greedy, ogling those suspended beyond even a ladder's reach. We pulled our long-poled fruit picker out of storage, knowing full well that its fruit-nabbing tines were spaced too far apart to do much good. So, Hugh used it to jostle, twist, and yank the branches until cherries rained down all over our vegetable garden. This worked quite well for a couple of weeks.

The more cherries we ate, the more we craved. We wanted every last little one! Hugh found an ingenious method to get to them. Or was it? I was a bit apprehensive and went into the house.

When I came back out thirty minutes later, the ground was littered with cherries, and the fruit picker was hooked on a branch high in the canopy. Hugh had been throwing the fruit picker like a spear above the tree line so it would dislodge cherry clusters hanging below! Now it was stuck; even its long handle was out of reach. After lobbing several objects in its direction, it finally dropped. From that moment on, we left the remaining cherries for the birds.

Several of our neighbors' sour cherry trees bore fruit soon after our sweet cherry tree did. And because we had shared our bounty with them, they did so with us. (And I learned to make a cherry torte!) Their 'Montmorency' trees were merely half the height of our 'Stella,' so harvesting them was much simpler.

We look forward to more prolific harvests from dwarf varieties of cherry trees adapted to our climate. They can be easily covered with a double layer of frost cloth whenever a frost is forecast. Last year we bought a shrublike sweet cherry tree called 'Juliet.' It hasn't matured yet, and unfortunately, sawfly larvae scraped off the undersides of some of its leaves, slightly stunting its growth. Next year we'll keep an eye out for this pest and treat our little tree for it. We'll also continue to inquire at local nurseries for more dwarf cherry trees. I hope we can all enjoy many good years to come!

Cindy Murray is a biologist and co-editor of *Gardening Etcetera* and has been a Coconino Master Gardener since 2010. She is married and has two amazing grown children and two grown grandchildren. Cindy enjoys photographing Arizona's great outdoors, especially sunsets, birds, and insects. She is a member of Arbor Day Foundation, Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, and The Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

The next Master Gardener class will be in-person starting on January 23, meeting on Tuesday afternoons from 1:00 to 4:30 in Flagstaff. For more information, go to:
<https://extension.arizona.edu/coconino-master-gardener>.