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**"NH Big Tree of the Month – April 2007"**  
**Black Cherry – *Prunus serotina***

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The gnarled, dark, scaly bark of the black cherry tree hides beautiful wood prized by furniture makers. Even more amazing is the width of the boards cut from ancient old trees found in antique cherry furniture.

I inherited mom's cherry drop leafed table she rescued from the outside porch of her country Victorian home. It was a utilitarian piece, probably used for buckets and junk and in terrible condition. She painstakingly restored it to reveal the beautiful wide cherry top and leaves.

I remember it in our dining room corner where it served as my oldest brother's homework table. I couldn't quite understand why Mom got so upset when she discovered an initial 'D' deeply carved on the leaf – all the school desks had initials carved in them. My brother didn't get the table, in spite of his initial. I have enjoyed it for years, admiring the beautifully grained 13 ½ inch wide by 40 inch long leaves. It's hard to imagine the size of the tree that produced such big straight boards.

Because a very tall skinny black cherry tree grows next to our house in a suburban woodland, I didn't realize they are a bit uncommon here in New Hampshire. Historically, black cherry trees grew throughout the eastern United States, but today this hardwood is a small component of the New Hampshire forest, found in hilly and mountainous regions on better soils, and far from the woodcutters' saws.

They are extremely cold hardy and will grow in frost pockets where other trees can't survive. The most magnificent black cherry trees grow in western Pennsylvania and upstate New York; the table came from the southern-tier of New York. Furniture makers value the lumber not only because of its rich reddish brown color, lovely grain that can be polished to a lustrous finish, but also because it shrinks little when dried, doesn't warp and works fairly easily. These qualities also make it good for floors, cabinets, interior trim and panels, pianos and organs, tool handles, and even caskets.

Another reason black cherry trees are uncommon is that they are poisonous to animals and farmers get rid of them to prevent sickness and even death. Ruminant animals appear to be more susceptible to poisoning than horses. A fact sheet from Virginia Cooperative Extension explains that:

*There are several local woodland plants that are poisonous to cows. Black cherry is especially dangerous. Cyanide is naturally present at low and non-toxic levels in live leaves of cherry. However, if limbs carrying green leaves are knocked out of the trees during summer storms or by other methods, the wilting process allows the cyanide to concentrate. Cattle seem to be drawn to this plant, and it only takes a few bites to send ol' Bessie to "Heifer Heaven".*

Cyanide poisoning results in hypoxia (deficiency of oxygen reaching the tissues). The first symptoms appear within a few minutes following consumption of plant material. Affected animals exhibit

excitement, incoordination, convulsions, rapid and labored breathing, bloating and coma. Death can occur in less than an hour due to internal asphyxiation.

Black cherry has escaped to Europe and the Netherlands where dairy farmers don't appreciate it either because of its toxicity to cows. Researchers at Indiana University are discovering that not only has it escaped but it is thriving and has become an invasive species problem. Apparently there are natural soil microbes that keep it in check in America that don't exist in Europe. "In parts of Europe, like the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, the tree is considered quite a pest," said biologist Keith Clay, a coauthor of the report. "We are told some Dutch school children are going out on field trips into the woods to pull the tree seedlings and saplings out."

Sometimes called fire cherry, it grows in forests destroyed by fire, in the newly exposed sunny sites. It is the largest and longest lived (up to 150-200 years) of the three native cherry species. The other two are the pin and choke cherry, usually small trees or shrubs.

The pin cherry, another opportunistic tree, sprouts in sunny sites and grows quickly in abandoned pastures, along the edges of streams and woods forming thickets of the straight-trunked saplings. The choke cherry, often covered in spring with eastern webworm nests, is more gnarled and branched like a sweet cherry tree. Both are short-lived and don't reach the height of black cherry trees.

Spring flowers are a way of identifying the three cherry trees: black cherry flowers in late spring a week to 10 days after choke cherry. Both have similar drooping, long clusters of blossoms that appear after the tree leafs out. Pin cherry blooms very early before the leaves and rounded clusters of flowers are striking on the bare twigs. The finely serrated black cherry leaf is oval coming to a sharp point at the tip, while the choke cherry leaf is fatter toward the tip and the pin cherry leaf is more slender.

The New Hampshire champion big cherry in Walpole was just measured last year and is colossal, about five feet in diameter and 87 feet tall with a nice crown.

While enjoying spring blossoms, be on the lookout for flowers in tree tops – they might be black cherry blooms. To compare a tree you discover with the New Hampshire county champions, visit the NH Big Tree web site at: [www.nhbigtrees.org](http://www.nhbigtrees.org) for the complete list champion Big Trees. If it seems bigger than those listed, contact the NH Big Tree State Coordinator, Carolyn Page, [carolyn\\_page@hotmail.com](mailto:carolyn_page@hotmail.com), phone: 603-664-2934, who will pass the information on to the appropriate county coordinator.

The UNH Cooperative Extension and the NH Division of Forests and Lands sponsor the NH Big Tree program in cooperation with the National Register of Big Trees through American Forests.

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