



An American plum in full bloom

American plum

Prunus americana by Amy Grisak



It's remarkable how often we stroll past a botanical treasure in plain sight without noticing it simply because it lacks flowers or fruit. Take the small, shrubby trees called wild American plums. For most of the season, they look like any other thicket. But once they are covered in flowers or laden with fruit, we can't believe they were right under our nose.

In a coulee in central Montana, my husband, who has a keen eye for these sorts of things, spotted a group of wild plums loaded with fruit and initially wondered if a homestead once stood nearby. The tallest shrubs reached 12 feet high and grew entangled with one another on an open, sunny hillside. Sampling the small red-purple fruit, I found it had a pleasant sweet-tart flavor. It didn't take long to realize that this was no cultivated variety. These shrubs were none other than native American plums, also known as wild plums, American wild plums, or red plums.

IDENTIFICATION

Though 15 native plum species grow in the United States, the American plum is the only one you're likely to find in Montana. Classified as both a large shrub and a small tree, it can grow up to 16 feet tall.

Young branches can be smooth or slightly fuzzy, but as the shrub ages, it takes on a gray color and develops thorns and pointed, hardened branches as a defense against browsing wildlife. Around the end of April or beginning of May, the tips of the short branches bloom with small, five-petaled white flowers in clusters of two to five with a sweet scent that attracts pollinators. Because these flowers appear before the leaves, they are a potential clue for spotting the shrub during spring.

The 2- to 4-inch-long leaves look similar to those on cultivated varieties. They are smooth, narrowly oval, and pointed at the end, with finely serrated edges.

The fruits are ½ inch to 1 inch in diameter when they ripen at the end of August or early September—making them Montana's largest native edible fruit. They start out with a yellowish hue and mature to a reddish-purple with yellow pulp and a pit in the center.

Amy Grisak is a writer in Great Falls.

Wildlife consuming the fruit help disperse seeds, but American plums will also sprout from root-shoots known as rhizomes. This encourages the plant to grow in dense patches of thicket rather than scattered individual shrubs.

HABITAT AND RANGE

The American plum grows across a wide swath of the continent from southern Saskatchewan east to southern Maine, and as far south as Florida and Arizona. It is particularly abundant in the woodlands and shrublands of the Great Plains.

You can find American plums throughout Montana, most commonly in the prairie breaks of the central and eastern parts of the state, within coulees and stream corridors with deep, moist soils.

In his book *Journal of a Trapper*, Osborne Russell wrote about feasting on American plums with James Bridger along Pryor Creek south of current-day Billings in the 1830s. He wrote:

The best plums I ever saw are there. The trees are loaded and breaking down to the ground with the finest kind, as large as pheasant eggs and sweet as sugar. They'll almost melt in yo' mouth.

Unfortunately, American plums face

several threats: competition from invasive species such as Russian olive and salt cedar; lack of frequent wildfires that maintain sunny, open habitats; and land conversion to farms, subdivisions, and other uses. They also suffer from black knot fungus and pests including plum curculio.

TRADITIONAL USES

Northern Cheyenne, Crow, and other tribes have traditional uses for American plums as both food and medicine, including ingesting the bark to treat diarrhea.

Members of the Corps of Discovery mentioned plums 28 times in their journals and identified five species. Decades later, homesteaders were delighted to note thickets where they collected fruit to make jams and jellies, a welcome treat when cultivated fruit was not available.

WILDLIFE VALUE

Dense thickets of American plums offer protection for nesting birds and small mammals, including porcupines and rabbits. Cedar waxwings, sharp-tailed grouse, wild turkeys, and many other birds feed on the fruit, whether on the tree or the ground. It's also valuable for mice and other small rodents, and a black bear is unlikely to pass up a plum feast. 🐻