

CONNECTING TRADITIONS WITH SCIENCE

WILD HIMALAYAN CHERRY

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English names: Wild Himalayan cherry, Sour cherry

Hindi names: Padam, Padmakh, Padmakashtha

Himachali name: Pajja

Botanical name: *Prunus cerasoides*

Synonyms: *Prunus puddum*, *Cerasus cerasoides*, *C. puddum*

Family: Rosaceae

Distribution: It occurs in the sub-temperate forests of the Himalayas from Himachal Pradesh in Northwest India to Southwest China at an altitude of 1,200 - 2,400 meters above the mean sea level.

Description: It is a small-sized (3-10m tall) and moderately branched deciduous tree with greyish-black bark (although young branches are green).



Leaves are simple, ovate-lanceolate or oblong-ovate and 8-12 × 3.2-5 cm in size. The petiole is 1.2–2 cm, the leaf base is rounded, the margin is serrate, and the leaf apex is acuminate. Flowers mostly open before the development of leaves. They are born in 1-4 flowered umbellate inflorescences. Sepals are usually reddish and triangular. Petals are pink and ovate to obovate. Stamens are approximately 30 in number and shorter than petals. Style is as long as stamens and stigma is disciform. The fruit is an orange or red drupe.

Flowering: October - November

Fruiting: Fruits ripen in March- April.

Uses

1. Medicinal uses: The plant is considered to have conceptive and anti-abortion properties. It reduces pain and flatulence. It is useful for fever, cold and cough. It is considered to be a general tonic and useful in the burning sensation of the body, seminal weakness and pregnancy. Young twigs are crushed and taken internally to prevent abortions. Seeds are used to remove stones.

2. Sacred Value: It is considered pious in many parts of Himachal Pradesh and worshipped and used during marriages with a wish for a happy and fruitful married life. This plant is also used in rituals by the local inhabitants in Nepal.



The name *Padam* for the plant might have its origin in the name of Lord Vishnu (*Padam-Anuttamam*: The unequalled state of perfection; Lord Vishnu is considered as the protector of the world) as the plant has conceptive and anti-abortive properties. In Himachal Pradesh, *Shivaratri Pooja* is considered incomplete without the leaves of wild Himalayan cherry. Rosaries are made up of leaves and dedicated to Shiva and Parvati, the most revered figures in the upper areas of Himachal Pradesh.

3. Ornamental value: It bears beautiful pink coloured flowers at a time when all other plants shed their leaves and flowers in autumn. It can be promoted as a landscape tree in colder areas.

4. Food value: The fruits can be eaten raw or cooked.

5. Other Uses: Gum obtained from the trunk can be used as a substitute for gum tragacanth. Fruits and leaves yield a dark green dye. Seeds can be used in necklaces. The branches can be used as walking sticks.

Hazards: All members of the genus *Prunus* contain amygdalin and prunasin (responsible for the bitter taste of seeds and leaves), substances that break down in water to form hydrocyanic acid (cyanide or prussic acid). This toxic compound stimulates respiration, improves digestion and gives a sense of well-being in small amounts. It is mostly present in very low quantities in the seeds. Some studies claim it to be beneficial in the treatment of cancer (source not known). **The higher quantity of hydrocyanic acid can cause respiratory failure and even death.**