

Barbados Cherry (*Malpighia glabra*): Identification, Uses and Maintenance

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Fort Myers, early November



Fort Lauderdale, Florida, early January

Family: *Malpighiaceae*

Common Names: Barbados cherry, acerola, cherry, cereza, cerezo

Synonyms: *M. biflora*, *M. puniceifolia*

Origin: Southern Mexico, Caribbean, Central America, Northwestern South America

USDA Zone: 10A-11 (28°F)

Plant Type: Large shrub or small tree

Plant Shape: Bushy

Growth Rate: Moderate

Typical Dimensions: 12' x 10'

Roots: Not problematic

Leaf Persistence: Evergreen

Leaf Type: Simple, entire

Flowering Season: April through October

Flower Color: Pink

Light Requirements: Sun, partial sun

Soil Requirements: Wide

Drought Tolerance: High, once established

Salt tolerance: High

Wind Tolerance: Moderate

Nutritional Requirements: Low

Propagation: Leafy hardwood cuttings, air layers, grafting

Motility: Low

IFAS Assessment: Not listed

Human Hazards: None

Major Potential Problems: Acerola weevil, nematodes; lesser problems: scale, aphids and whitefly

Uses: Edible fruits, shrub, small tree, hedge

Distribution

Barbados cherry (*Malpighia glabra*) is native to Tropical America. It is widely distributed throughout the Americas including Bermuda, Bahamas, southern California, southern Texas and south Florida. New growth freezes at about 30°F but the tree has been found growing as far north as Manatee County in south Florida, USDA zone 9B.

Growth Habit

This is a densely branched large shrub or small tree. In Florida, it typically grows to about 12 feet tall with similar width. The tree has a short trunk of about 4 inches and is usually multi-trunked. Some cultivars have an upright growth pattern, while others sprawl. The root system is shallow, making the tree somewhat vulnerable to high winds. The bark is brown or gray and somewhat smooth, with light brown lenticels. The twigs are gray, ringed at the nodes with whitish lenticels.



Kingston, Jamaica, late May



Queensbury, Jamaica, early September



Palmetto, Florida, late October

Leaves

The evergreen leaves are entire, somewhat wavy and turned slightly upwards. They are oppositely paired, and are lanceolate, elliptic to ovate shaped. Blades are typically to 3 inches long and 1.5 inches wide. The petioles are short, about 0.15 inches long. The upper leaf surface is a shiny green, and the lower surface a dull light green.



Oppositely arranged leaves



Leaf examples

Flowers and Flowering

Flowers are arranged in umbels or corymbs of a few flowers at the leaf bases of new stems and older wood. They are on short stalks of about 0.25 inches long. The flower has five pink or lavender, spoon-shaped, fringed petals about 0.3 inch long. The ten stamens are united into a tube at the base; the pistil has a short ovary and three styles. Flowering is mostly from April through October in numerous short episodes. Bees are the primary pollinators.



Flowers at the leaf base of new stem with whitish lenticles.



Flowers at the leaf base of older wood.

Fruits and Fruiting

Store bought trees are often in fruit at the time of purchase. Fruit is borne on a pedicel originating from the leaf axil. The fruits (drupes) are rounded, slightly flattened, and faintly three lobed. It takes about four to five weeks for flowers to develop to mature edible fruits. With sufficient rainfall or irrigation, fruit begin appearing in abundance in May with successive crops until about November. The tree is highly productive. Fruits are best picked and eaten right off the tree when fully ripe. Since there is continuous fruiting over long periods, picking is done every day, every other day, or ever three days to avoid loss by falling.

As it matures, the fruit turns rapidly from green, to yellow, to a fire engine red, and finally to a deep crimson. It is usually less than 1 inch in diameter when fully matured. The flesh is orange in color; the seed has three triangular, fused, winged lobes, which are usually spat from the mouth after flesh consumption. The flavor ranges from tart and acidic to mildly sweet. Ripe fruits are highly perishable but can withstand storing for about three days at 45°F.



Fort Myers, late June.



Fort Lauderdale, late May



A day's crop from a 4 foot tree.

Uses

Grow Barbados cherry as a small fruit tree, large shrub, hedge, or container plant. It is well suited as a foundation planting for larger buildings or used in the rear of the shrubbery border. It can be used as a small accent tree just as Japanese Ligustrum is used. Fruits are eaten fresh off the tree or juiced. They have a very high ascorbic acid content thus an excellent source of Vitamin C. The fruits are highly attractive to humans and birds.

Growing Conditions and Management

Several clones were developed in the 1950's and 60's but have not persisted in the trade. The plant is sold as *M. glabra* and is commonly available in nurseries throughout South Florida. It is mostly propagated by air layering or cuttings and grows in a wide range of well-drained soils. In most of south Florida, it can be transplanted from container to soil at anytime of the year. In the coldest regions, zone 9B and interior peninsula, avoid transplanting from December through February. Established plants will survive temperatures in the high 20's Fahrenheit for short periods of time. In the coldest areas, the plant is usually semideciduous.

Plant establishment is relatively fast and easy provided it is sufficiently irrigated. Plants should be protected from lawn mowers, weed whackers, and lawn grass by the creation of a weed free border around the plant. In the driest years, plant may fail to yield adequately until the summer rains. During such times, spring irrigation is useful in promoting flowering and fruiting. Plants grown from cutting and air layering are more susceptible to strong wind damage than grafted tree as they have a shallow fibrous root system. Grafted plants have a deeper tap root system.

Pests and Diseases

The acerola weevil is sometimes the most important pest of Barbados cherry in Florida. Adult weevils deposit eggs on the anthers of flowers, and in immature fruits. The larvae develop in the flowers and fruits causing extensive damage to flowers and the flesh of fruits. The peak months for adult emergence from the fruits is from late June through September.

Nematodes can be a serious problem in mostly sandy soils. Occasional sucking insects such as whiteflies and scales are minor problems. Sooty mold is an indication of the presence of sucking insects.



Black sooty mold caused by whiteflies



Whiteflies feed on the underside of leaves

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All pictures taken by Stephen H. Brown, brownsh@ufl.edu

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This fact sheet was reviewed by Carlos Balerdi, Extension Agent Emeritus, Miami-Dade County; Peggy Cruz, Lee County Extension; Pat Rooney, Lee County Master Gardener.

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