

Weeping Cherry—Four Season Interest

By Susan Camp

Last spring I worried and fretted over our weeping Higan cherry (*Prunus subhirtella* ‘Pendula’). There was no specific problem; it just didn’t look good. The blossoms appeared pale and sparse, compared with previous seasons. Jim thought the tree looked fine. After the blossoms fell and the leaves emerged, its appearance improved. The fall color was vibrant and the tree survived this strange winter. It is flowering normally right now.

Weeping Higan cherry is a Japanese native, but has flourished as a popular specimen tree in North American landscapes for many years. It needs a special location to show off the drifting, flowing cascades of pink or white, single or double blossoms. After flowering, the dense umbrella of dark green, ovate leaves provides cool summer shade. Birds eat the pea-sized, black fruits that develop after the blossoms drop. In the fall, leaves turn brilliant shades of yellow, orange, or red, depending on the variety. The bare structure of this graceful tree provides winter interest, particularly when covered with snow.

P. subhirtella prefers full sun to part shade and moist, fertile, well-drained, acidic, sandy or clay soil in USDA Cold Hardiness Zones 5a through 8b. It is drought tolerant, but will not survive in standing water or boggy soil. Fertilize with a balanced acidic fertilizer in the spring, starting about six inches from the trunk to just past the drip line. Weeping cherry needs water weekly during periods of drought. Retain moisture by spreading mulch to a depth of three to four inches in a three foot diameter circle around the tree, starting six inches away from the trunk.

Weeping cherry reaches a mature height of 20 to 40 feet, depending on the variety, with an irregular spread of 15 to 25 feet. Some specimens are grown on their own rootstocks, but most weeping cherries are grafted onto the trunks of other cherry species. Recognizing whether your weeping cherry is grafted or natural becomes important at pruning time. Grafted trees have a knot on the trunk, about one foot down from the crown. A natural tree has a straight trunk.

Trim the weeping branches of a grafted tree to about six inches above the ground, either evenly for a uniform look, or irregularly, for a more natural appearance. Remove any branches that are growing straight up; they will not weep. Then remove diseased or dead branches and any that are rubbing against each other, particularly in the crown. Remove suckers growing from the base of the tree. Finally, trim the tree into an aesthetically pleasing form. The pruning technique for a natural tree is similar, except that upright twigs should not be trimmed. Over time, they will assume a weeping habit.

Weeping cherry prefers to be left alone, with only minimal “cleanup” pruning. Most authors recommend pruning in late spring, just after flowering. You can prune in late fall, if the tree is dormant.

Weeping Higan cherry is susceptible to aphids, scale insects, spider mites, borers, and tent caterpillars. Horticultural oil will help prevent insect problems. Use *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) when tent caterpillars are first noticed.

Powdery mildew and other fungi that disfigure or damage leaves and a bacterium that causes twig cankers and leaf spot can cause problems. Prune out and dispose of damaged twigs and branches.

Prunus pendula 'Pendula Rosea' is a 15 to 25 foot tree with single, pink blossoms and dark green leaves that turn vibrant shades of orange and red in the fall. 'Pendula Plena Rosea' has deep pink buds, shading to lighter pink double blossoms after opening. 'Snow Fountains' grows to about 12 feet, with frothy white blossoms.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-611 "Selecting Landscape Plants: Flowering Trees" offers general information on selection factors, as well as thumbnail sketches of several flowering trees. Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry "*Prunus subhirtella*" and the University of Florida IFAS Extension Publication #ENH-389 "*Prunus subhirtella* 'Pendula': Weeping Higan Cherry" provide information on growing this lovely tree.

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