

FAQ:

# Invasive Chokecherry Trees in Alaska



*(Prunus padus & Prunus virginiana)*

Division of Forestry 2021

## What are chokecherry trees?

Chokecherries were originally introduced to Alaska in the 1950s as attractive ornamentals, and were prized for their hardiness, beautiful flowers, and edible berries. These trees continued to be planted throughout much of Alaska, ranging from Juneau to Fairbanks until the early 2000's, and are still sold in some nurseries today. They grow up to 35 feet tall, with smooth brown or gray bark, dark green leaves, and showy, fragrant white flowers which grow in drooping cylindrical clusters. Chokecherries produce small, bitter black cherries which ripen in late summer, and are loved by birds.



## Why are chokecherry trees a problem?

Chokecherries are not native to Alaska and are detrimental to our native ecosystems in a variety of ways. They outcompete native vegetation, forming thick infestations and excluding desirable plants that wildlife rely on for habitat and food. Recent studies have shown that these trees support fewer terrestrial insects than native plants, which are a key food source for salmon and other fish. Chokecherry trees have caused cyanide poisoning of moose. Additionally, they create dense monocultures, which can impair visibility and limit access to recreational areas.

## How do I get rid of my chokecherries

Unfortunately, removing a chokecherry is not as simple as cutting it down. These trees are able to resprout from the stump, stems and roots when cut. To effectively kill these trees, you must remove both the above and below ground portion of the tree. Seedlings and small trees up to 2 inches in diameter may be removed by hand using a special tool called an Uprooter™. It is important to note that ALL portions of the roots must be removed, as the tree can resprout from any remaining fragments.

For larger infestations and mature trees, systemic herbicides are the most effective control method. These herbicides are absorbed directly into the trees vascular system and transported to all parts of the plant, preventing it from resprouting. There are a variety of methods for applying herbicide to these trees – more information can be found in the UAF Cooperative Extension Service publication [Control of Invasive Chokecherry Trees](#).

## Are all cherries invasive?

Not all cherry species are invasive. In fact, some species, like sour cherry (*Prunus cerasus*) make great landscape plants. *Prunus padus* and *Prunus virginiana* are currently the only cherry species known to be invasive in Alaska.

## What should I plant instead?

Chokecherries provide many desirable qualities, and homeowners are often disappointed to learn that they should be removed. Luckily, there are plenty of other flowering and/or fruiting trees that can be planted instead. Some examples include amur maple (*Acer ginnala*), crab apple (*malus spp.*), and Ussurian pear (*Pyrus Ussuriensis*). When selecting a replacement tree, be sure to choose a variety that corresponds with your local hardiness zone. Visit the [Landscape Plants for Alaska](#) website for more information.

## How can I tell if I have a chokecherry?

Chokecherries have some distinctive features that make them relatively easy to identify. The easiest way to tell if you have a chokecherry is to look at the flowers, which are some of the first to bloom between late May and early June. Chokecherry flowers are small, white and very fragrant, and grow in long drooping cylindrical clusters called racemes. If you notice the presence of these flowers along with small black berries that ripen in late summer, chances are good that you have a chokecherry. Note that amur chokecherry also shares these features, but has distinctive copper colored, exfoliant bark. Photos of plant features can be found in the UAF Cooperative Extension Service publication [Control of Invasive Chokecherry Trees](#). If you need help identifying your tree, contact the DNR Community Forestry Program.



## I have a chokecherry. Now what?

If you have an invasive chokecherry growing on your property, you should consider removal. Even if you live in an urban area where spread may not seem like an issue, remember that seeds can be spread by birds and other wildlife – meaning that your tree may be contributing to the decline of ecosystem health in nearby forests, steams, and greenbelts. For information on removal techniques and additional resources, contact the DNR Community Forestry Program.

## Are chokecherries banned, or illegal?

There is currently no statewide regulatory authority that prohibits the sale, planting, or maintenance of *Prunus padus* or *Prunus virginiana* in Alaska. However, the Municipality of Anchorage has banned the sale of these plants.

## What can I do to help?

A large part of combating any invasive species is raising public awareness about the issue. You can help by spreading the word about these trees to friends, family, and neighbors. Additionally, many towns and cities host annual ‘Weed Smackdowns’ which give volunteers the opportunity to assist local government and nonprofits in removing unwanted species from public land. For information about volunteer opportunities in your area, contact the DNR Community Forestry Program. You can also help by reporting sightings of these plants to the [Alaska Invasive Species Partnership](#) or the invasive species hotline at 1-877-Invasiv (1-877-468-2748).

## Resources

- [Alaska Exotic Plants Clearing House \(AKEPIC\)](#)
- [Species Biography: Prunus padus](#)
- [Species Biography: Prunus virginiana](#)
- [Pamphlet: This Beauty is a Beast!](#)
- [Handout: Control of Invasive Chokecherry Trees](#)
- [Report: Cyanide-poisoned Moose](#)
- [Research: Invasive European bird cherry \(Prunus padus\) reduces terrestrial prey subsidies to urban Alaskan salmon streams](#)
- [Landscape Plants for Alaska](#)

## Contact:

- DNR Community Forestry Program  
[communityforestry@alaska.gov](mailto:communityforestry@alaska.gov)  
<http://forestry.alaska.gov/community/index>  
907-269-8465
- UAF Cooperative Extension Service  
[uaf-foresthealth@alaska.edu](mailto:uaf-foresthealth@alaska.edu)  
[www.alaskainvasives.org](http://www.alaskainvasives.org)  
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