

Saskatoons in Alberta

Saskatoon berries are native to Alberta. The Plains Indians ate the fruit both fresh and dried in their dietary staple, pemmican.

Today, the saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) is valued for its fruit and as an ornamental shrub or hedge. The shrub is tall and upright with a spreading form. Early in the spring, before the leaves are fully out, clusters of white blossoms appear. The fall colour of this shrub also makes it an outstanding addition to the landscape. Saskatoons are self-fertile, but they seem to do better when grown in groups.

The fruit is excellent when eaten fresh, cooked in pies and desserts, canned, frozen or made into wine or juice. Thousands of acres are now commercially produced on the Canadian prairies, but this factsheet will focus on home garden Saskatoon berry production.

Location and soils

Saskatoons thrive on most soils with plenty of organic matter. They need good drainage as the plant does not like wet roots. They prefer slightly acidic soils but will grow reasonably well on alkaline soils with a pH of up to 7.5.

Saskatoons bloom early, making them highly susceptible to early spring frosts. Locations with a gentle slope and good air drainage are ideal for cultivation.

Propagation

Saskatoons can be propagated from seed, root sprouts (suckers) or tissue culture plants. Seedling and tissue cultured plant material is available from numerous nurseries throughout the province. Some amount of variability will exist between seedling plants, whereas tissue culture or other vegetatively propagated plants are identical,

To gather seed, collect the fruit as soon as it ripens, and clean the fruit pulp from the seed. Clean seed can be sown in the fall, and germination will occur in the following spring.

Plant material is collected in early spring when plants are dormant. Dig out young suckers with as many fine roots as possible.

Cut back tops to a height of 5 cm, plant, and keep them well watered.

The first (small) crop may be expected in about four years from planting. Peak production will take another two or three years, if plants develop well.

Saskatoons thrive on most soils with plenty of organic matter.

Planting

Plant saskatoons in hedge rows 0.6 to 1 m apart with a 4 to 6 m spacing between rows.

Annual fertilization

Measure 150 mL of 23-23-0 or 27-14-0 fertilizer with a liquid measuring cup, and apply under the branches and to 30 cm beyond each plant. Fertilize between flowering and harvest time.

Cultivation

Cultivation controls weeds that compete for moisture, and it also destroys or covers up any diseased berries on the ground. This practice helps control disease and insect problems in the crop. Shallow cultivation prevents damage to the fragile roots.

Pruning

Saskatoons produce fruit on the previous year's growth and on older wood. Generally, the younger, more vigorous branches yield the best quality fruit.

Pruning should be done early in the spring after the danger of severe cold weather has passed, but before bud break. Prune to control the height of the bushes; a height of 2 m is ideal. Pruning out branches that are the thickness of a toonie or greater will help keep the plant height manageable. Remove all diseased, damaged and weak growth. Cut off low branches and thin the center to keep it open.

After the plants are 6- to 7-years old, prune out a few 5- to 7-year-old branches yearly to encourage new and vigorous shoot growth. Older shrubs can be rejuvenated by cutting them back to ground level and allowing new sprouts to grow.

Irrigation

Watering is required to establish young plants. Ensure the soil is kept evenly moist at this time. Once the plants are established, supplemental water will aid in the production of plump, juicy berries. Water the plants from blossoming until harvest. Water should be applied to the base of the plant, rather than on the foliage, to reduce the incidence of leaf diseases.

The average amount of water required by the plant is 15 to 25 mm per week, but this amount depends greatly on the soil type and the weather conditions. Hot, dry winds will increase the need for water; cool weather decreases water requirements. Soils with high levels of organic matter or clay do not require as much water as sandy soils do.

Bird protection

Plastic netting is one of the best tools to use to protect the ripening fruit from birds. Colourful streamers, aluminum pie tins and noise makers will work temporarily until the birds learn that these devices are not a threat. Plastic owls will also deter the birds, but the owls must be moved around in the planting to successfully fool the birds.

Pests

A number of disease and insect pests can be troublesome in Saskatoon berries, depending on the plant location, the season and the age and health of the planting. Many pests

are harboured in native stands, moving into plantations over time.

Some common diseases in home garden plantings include blackleaf/witch's broom, Saskatoon berry/juniper rust and Cytospora canker. There are also a number of insect pests.

Careful management of water, nutrients, air flow and plant density, as well as other practices, can help reduce the potential pests. Encourage natural predators to combat cyclic insect pests, and remove disease, damaged or dying plant material as it appears.

Harvesting

Harvest the berries when they turn from pink to deep purple. Saskatoon berries ripen fairly evenly, and most of the crop can be picked at one time.

Cultivars

Smoky: Large, round, fleshy, sweet, mild-flavoured fruit. Shrub is upright and spreading, very productive and suckers freely.

Northline: Upright spreading form, very productive, produces sweet fruit within three years, suckers freely.

Thiessen: Large, pleasant-flavoured fruit, uneven fruit ripening.

Honeywood: Vigorous, blooms late. Large pleasant-tasting fruit with few seeds. Produces heavy within three or four years.

JB-30: Large fruit on a compact bush, low suckering, high yielding.

Other cultivars exist with a range of characteristics (fruit and plant shape). Consult a local nursery for available plant material choices.

Prepared by

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development

For more information, contact

Alberta Ag-Info Centre
Call toll free: 310-FARM (3276)

Website: www.agriculture.alberta.ca