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Chickasaw plum flowers appear in early spring.

Photo: Heather Brasell

# Native Plant Highlight: Chickasaw Plum

*prunus angustifolia*

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*This article is courtesy of the Coast Plain Chapter of the Georgia Native Plant Society. The GNPS is dedicated to promoting the stewardship and conservation of Georgia's native plants and their habitats. The Coastal Plain Chapter serves the people in the Coastal Plain ecoregion of Georgia. This includes all areas south of the Fall Line in middle Georgia, from the Alabama and Florida borders to the Atlantic ocean. To learn more, please visit their [website](#).*

How many of you remember picking and eating wild plums growing on the road side in early summer? Most likely, you were enjoying this tart native treat!

Chickasaw plum / *Prunus angustifolia* is a popular plant for developing wildlife habitat, but it also is a favorite for making wine, jellies and preserves. This species is one of several native wild plums that you see in thickets along roadsides and overgrown fields.

The taste may be too tart and acidic to be really enjoyed in their raw state, but you can make a beautiful and tasty bright red jelly using simple recipes found on the internet. Real aficionados may make wine using some minimal wine-making equipment and ingredients.

## Description

The Chickasaw plum is a deciduous shrub or small tree in the Rosaceae (rose) family. It is also commonly known as sand plum, sandhill plum,

or mountain cherry. A long-lived perennial, it can grow up to 25 feet tall and produces suckers to form dense thickets. The leaves are simple, alternate, having blades with acute tips, up to 2.4" long, by .8" wide. The margins are finely serrated and each tooth has a tiny red gland on the tip.

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The plant was cultivated by the Chickasaw Indians and other indigenous peoples who consumed it fresh or dried it for winter, long before colonists arrived. In William Bartram's travels through the southeastern U.S. in the late 18th century, he wrote that "he never saw the Chickasaw plum wild in the forests but always in old deserted Indian plantations." He hypothesized that the Chickasaw Indians brought it from the Southwest beyond the Mississippi River.

Flowers appear in early spring, before the leaves. Flowers have five petals and are bisexual, about 1/2" in diameter, white, in umbels of 2-4 flowers. The branches are thorny and slender. The fruit forms yellow or red drupes which are round and 1/4" to 1/2" in diameter. They mature in early

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summer and are edible though they contain a large stone. It should be noted that though poison severity is low - the stems, leaves and seeds contain cyanide and should not be eaten.



**When ripened, Chickasaw plum fruit can be eaten fresh or made into jellies, preserves or other desserts.**

**Photo:** John Ruter, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org

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### Native Habitat

Habitats (in USDA zones 5a - 8b) include open woodlands, woodland edges, forest openings, savannas, prairies, plains, meadows, pastures, fence rows and roadsides. In full sun, it will be denser and fuller and will colonize more thickly. In part shade, it will be more airy and will colonize more loosely.

### Basic Care

Chickasaw plum prefers loose, sandy soil and uses little water, once established. It prefers

an acid pH, but will grow in a wide range of soil types. It can be propagated by seed, the harvest of suckers, and by cuttings. Cuttings taken from semi-hardwood and softwood in summer are the easiest to root. Germination of most seeds requires cold stratification.

### Benefits in Home Landscape

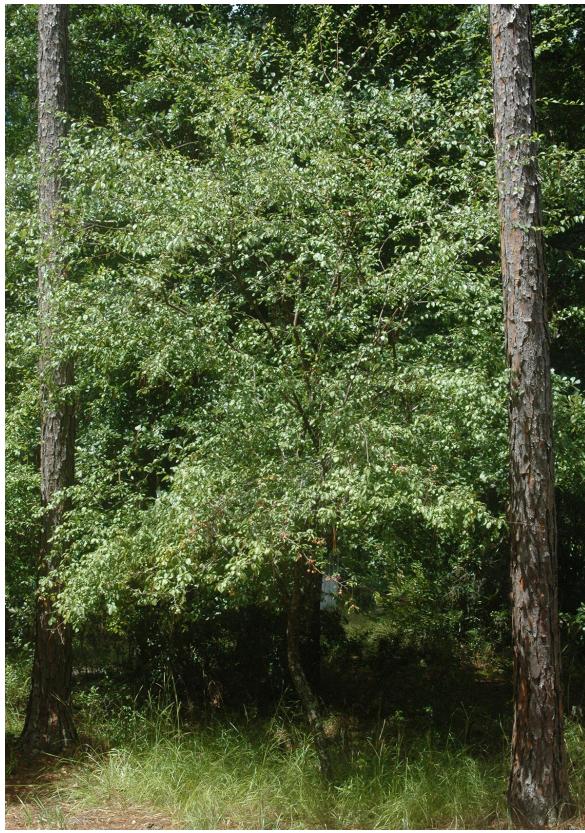
Though they are part of the rural landscape in much of the southern and south central United States, you may consider planting one as a specimen or several for an informal hedge, windbreak, or for erosion control. To keep the plant in check in a small space, prevent unwanted spread by removing the suckers.

Its white flowers are beautiful in the spring. Insects and disease may occasionally attack this species,

but are not a serious problem in conservation settings. Commercial plantings of plum may require the control of the primary insect pest, plum curculio (*Conotrachelus nenuphar*).



**Chickasaw plum flowers appear in early spring.**  
**Photo:** Heather Brasell



**Chickasaw Plum is a thicket-forming small tree with thorny side branches.**

**Photo: Karan Rawlins, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org**

## References

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North Carolina Extension Gardener Tool Box: <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/prunus-angustifolia/#poison>

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University of Florida UF / IFAS Gardening Solutions. <https://gardensolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/trees-and-shrubs/trees/chickasaw-plum.html>

USDA NRCS Plant Fact Sheet. [https://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs\\_pran3.pdf](https://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_pran3.pdf)



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