

The Plantsman's Choice

Presenting promising urban trees

Sargent's cherry

A spring-blooming beauty with an autumnal treat

Henrik Sjöman and Andrew Hiron

Prunus sargentii, commonly known as Sargent's cherry or north Japanese hill cherry, is native to Japan, Korea and Sakhalin (Russia). The species is named after Charles Sprague Sargent, the first director of Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum in Boston, US.

In its native range the species is present in mixed woodland in foothills and on steep open slopes, where it demonstrates a good tolerance for really challenging conditions. The species develops into a small to medium-sized tree with an upright growth habit when young. With age, the crown shape becomes more rounded before eventually developing an open, rather irregular habit. In cultivation, the trees reach 9–12m tall and 7–9m wide. However, the size and habit can vary between cultivars.

The blossom occurs in May with simple pink flowers that protrude at the same time as the young coppery leaves expand. Although the blooms are not as extravagant as those of some other ornamental cherries, the combination of pink flowers and copper-coloured leaves is still very beautiful. Over time, the leaves change, becoming dark green during summer. The small, dark red fruits are readily devoured by birds before they can drop to the ground, and as a happy consequence the fruits seldom cause substantial littering in paved environments.

Autumn colour depends somewhat on the year and cultivar but the dark red to orange tones rarely disappoint. Indeed, autumn colour is perhaps the most prominent ornamental asset of this species as it comes quite early, often in early September, and continues for over a month.

Like many others, the pure species varies substantially in habit, flower colour, flower size

and autumnal characteristics so it is important to choose a cultivar with a known ornamental expression if that is what is desired.

In cultivation, the species develops best in full sun to partial shade in sheltered locations on well-drained, nutrient-rich soils, but it should not be considered particularly demanding in terms of growing sites as it has shown good development even in paved inner-city environments. It is, however, very sensitive to heavy or poorly drained soils. Among spring-blossoming ornamental cherries, the Sargent's cherry is one of the most resilient and therefore one of the most useful for challenging urban environments. On its own roots, Sargent's cherry is not as well adapted to high pH as our native wild cherry (*P. avium*). However, it is often grafted on *P. avium*, in which case tolerance to higher soil pH can be achieved.

In cold, snowy winters the flower buds of many ornamental cherries are eaten by birds, such as bullfinches. It seems that the flower buds of Sargent's cherry are less palatable to avian tastes and therefore it is much more likely to deliver a strong spring-time display. The Sargent's cherry has a very wide range of uses, not least as a beautiful solitary tree in gardens and parks, as a smaller tree in street environments or as an exotic element in 'natural plantations'.

Prunus sargentii 'Charles Sargent'

This Dutch selection is the most common form of Sargent's cherry. The crown form becomes broadly rounded and the trees grow 8–10m high and equally wide. The bark is shiny and a beautiful chestnut brown. The flowers are bright pink; they begin opening in early May and last for about three weeks. The cultivar has a brilliant orange-red autumn colour.

Prunus sargentii 'Rancho'

This American selection of Sargent's cherry is exceptionally narrow in youth. With increasing age, the crown becomes wider, but rarely more than 4–5m. The height is 8–10m. The flowers are pink and its autumn colour is usually a beautifully carmine red.



Henrik Sjöman is a Lecturer at the Department of Landscape Architecture, Planning and Management for the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and a Scientific Curator at Gothenburg Botanic Garden, Sweden.



Andrew Hiron is a Senior Lecturer in Arboriculture and Urban Forestry at Myerscough College. He is also currently developing tree species selection guidance for urban environments as

part of a NERC-funded Green Infrastructure Knowledge Exchange project.



Prunus sargentii in flower. The buds seem to be less attractive to bullfinches than those of some other cherry species.



Prunus sargentii in autumn colour. The tree shows good tolerance for challenging conditions.