

## Evans Cherry

I was flattered to see the 'Evans cherry' on the front cover of *The Gardener*. It's the cherry I rescued from oblivion in 1976 in Sherwood Park, Alberta.

I was Alberta Agriculture's Provincial Plant Pathologist when I travelled to Horse Hill, Alberta, midway between Edmonton and Fort Saskatchewan visited, in late July. In response to an enquiry about phenomenal cherry trees growing in the area, I was shown an orchard of Evans cherries owned by Mrs. Bogward, a lady well into her seventies. Mrs. Bogward told me that if I wanted to save these cherry trees, I should dig up the rooted suckers immediately. She said her land had been acquired to build a federal prison, and work was set to commence the following year.

That fall, I dug up many suckers and planted them at my garden in Sherwood Park as well as on a friend's farm at Tofield, Alberta. Between 1978 and 1980, I moved to Vegreville and then back to Edmonton in 1981. In the meantime, the Evans cherry had multiplied and suckered tenfold, particularly at the Tofield farm location.

In the fall of 1981, I dug up some 15 one-foot Evans cherry suckers from Tofield and planted them as a hedge around my garden. By 1986, they were six to eight feet tall and producing the first real crop of cherries. In the succeeding years, I had endless visits from horticulturists marvelling at the huge crops of cherries. I gave away rooted cherry suckers every fall as fast as I could produce them. I also specifically targeted good friends in the rugby community and institutions such as Olds College, Alberta's Crop Diversification Centre and the CDC North, Government House in Calgary, the University of Alberta and every Italian gardener in Edmonton.

In 1990, I wrote an article for *The Prairie Gardener* entitled "Cherries for the Prairies." At that time, Dr. Kris Pruski, a tissue culture specialist at CDC North, named the cherry the Evans cherry. Meanwhile, he had several individuals tissue culturing the Evans cherry, including Arden Delidais from DNA Gardens at Elnora, Alberta. Arden raised several thousand cherry seedlings from tissue culture, which we bought and marketed through T & T Gardens in Winnipeg. From that year on, Evans cherry tissue culture production exploded Canada-wide.

I tried growing hundreds of cherries from the Evans cherry seed, but none of the seedlings produced much in the way of cherries. In a CBC French documentary, an eight-year-old Evans cherry tree was recorded from flowering to

ripening to harvest. This tree, some eight feet tall and wide, produced a recorded (and remarkable!) 450 pounds of ripe red cherries. The average yield of the commercial Montmorency sour cherries grown in the US (Michigan and Wisconsin) averages only 50 pounds per tree. By comparison, the cultivars Meteor and North Star did very poorly in my garden, producing only a few pounds of berries on eight-year-old trees.

I have no explanation for the phenomenal yield of the Evans cherry—it seems to produce just about two cherries for every leaf in some seasons. The cherry is certainly Zone 3 hardy, but good cherry crops have been grown in the Zone 2 Northwestern Peace River Region and the Northeastern Fort McMurray Region of Alberta. Commercial pick your own Evans cherry orchards now range from Prince George, BC to Winnipeg. At present, this cherry is available across Canada and most, if not all, of the northern United States. Across North America, cherry tree numbers are suspected to be in the many millions.

Where did this cherry tree come from? It's a frequently asked question. Mrs. Bogward said the original Evans cherry tree was given to her parents by the "English" in 1923. At the time of my visit, the original tree, with a very rotten trunk, was still alive with a few green leafed branches.

Over time, I found out that the cherry tree very likely came from coastal Alaska. Sour cherry trees grow wild along the Alaskan coast, especially near Skagway and Haines City. Haines City runs an annual cherry festival. In the 1920s, the Alaskan government gave away thousands of cherry trees (seedlings) to new settlers coming into Alaska. Not many miles away from the Alaska border in the Yukon Territory, the Canadian government had an agricultural research station at Haines Junction. It is likely Haines Junction personnel brought cherry trees to the Edmonton area, where they had agricultural research plots near the present CDC North research station, which is near Horse Hill.

Remember, the Alaska coast was originally colonized by Russian settlers from western Russia and Siberia. These colonists likely brought the cherry trees to the Alaskan coast, where only the hardiest of cherries would have survived. As a final footnote, many Evans cherries have found their way back to orchardists in Alaska.

- by Dr. Leuan Evans



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