

## A Jamming Plant

Autumn conjures up many visions. Naturally, there is the foliage color and the crunch of those colorful leaves under foot. There is also the ripening and harvesting of fruits, although not all fruits are palatable fresh off the plant since some are best consumed as jams or preserves. This aptly describes the genus *Aronia* or Chokeberry that well embodies all these autumnal visions!

*Aronia* is a member of the rosaceae or Rose Family and all three species within this genus are North American natives. *Aronia* was penned by the German physician and botanist Friedrich Kasimir Medikus (1738-1808). The name stems from the Greek *Aria*, which was a species of Mountain Ash or *Sorbus* whose fruits resemble that of Chokeberry. The common name of Chokeberry developed from the very astringent taste of the fruit that often induces choking when eaten raw. However, when cooked with adequate sugar, the fruit is ideal for jams and preserves!

The species that is best known in the gardening world is *Aronia arbutifolia*, the Red Chokeberry. Carl Linnaeus (1707-1758) first described the plant as a Pear, naming it *Pyrus arbutifolia*, with the species epithet describing the similarity of the narrow, sharply pointed foliage to that of the tree *Abutilon*. Christiaan Hendrik Persoon (1761-1836), a mycologist and taxonomist correctly altered the genus to *Aronia* in 1807. Native to both wet and dry thickets from Nova Scotia and Ontario south to Texas and Florida, Red Chokeberry is a multi-stemmed shrub that reaches 6-8' tall with a lightly rhizomatous root system, allowing it to slowly develop large colonies. In late April into May, plants produce copious quantities of 1 ½" diameter panicles of white, ¼" diameter 5-petaled flowers (an image of the flowers of *Aronia melanocarpa* are pictured further

down). The ensuing clusters of ¼" fruits, technically called pomes, develop a bright red color that incited the common name. Interestingly, unlike its Apple Tree cousins, *Aronia* will produce fruit without a genetically different partner. The fruit looks great in combination with its bright red fall color and it remains' attractive through mid-winter. Unfortunately, the fruits are not beloved by birds, perhaps due to the relatively low protein levels!



The selection 'Brilliantissima' (pictured at right) offers a more compact height of 6', glossy foliage and larger, more abundant fruit.



The other commonly available species is *Aronia melanocarpa* or Black Chokeberry. Native to swamps, bogs, moist thickets and even dry upland regions throughout Newfoundland to Ontario, south to Georgia, this plant is extremely adaptable. This plant was first described by Andre Michaux (1746-1802), and published posthumously in 1803 by his son. Michaux described the plant as *Mespilus arbutifolia* var. *melanocarpa*. Stephen Elliot (1771-1830) was a Doctor and a botanist living in South Carolina. In 1821 he published 'A Sketch of the Botany of South Carolina and Georgia', in which the plant was properly named! The species epithet describes the fruit and once again is from the Greek, with *Melas* meaning

black and *Kapros* fruit. Black Chokeberry is actually a more attractive plant than its cousin since it is not as leggy, growing to a more compact 3-4' tall. The fall color is an attractive purple red

(as seen in the image at right), but its true interest lies once again in the fruit. The dark purple, blueberry-like fruit (pictured below at right) are copiously produced to the extent that the branches will often arch over under the 15-20 lbs of fruit that is produced per plant! The fruit yields high levels of Vitamin C and is highly regarded in Russia and other parts of Europe where this species is commercially grown in vast quantities. The fruit also possess the highest levels of antioxidants of any temperate fruit. Yet again, the fruit is rather insipid, although



numerous European selections are noted for a less astringent taste. The cultivar 'Viking' is one such selection that bears larger fruit and is readily available in the US.

I have always found the red-fruited Chokeberry to be a great asset for the Garden. However, of late I have found the subtle beauty of the *Aronia melanocarpa* with its more compact form to be a ‘Garden Jewel’. Regardless, both will add jamming seasonal colors and fruit to your Garden and kitchen table!

Note: All the images, with the exception of *Aronia melanocarpa* in fall color were photographed by Lisa Strovinsky at Pleasant Run Nursery.

