Cherry trees can conjure up mental images from a hatchet wielding young George Washington to a freshly baked cobbler. Pecks of tart cherries are a perennial summer favorite at Michigan fruit stands as they should be with Michigan being the largest producer of tart cherries in the United States. Traverse City and Washington D.C. have hosted festivals in honor of these trees for decades. Yet when choosing an ornamental tree for our gardens, cherries and other species of the genus Prunus may not be the first trees that come to mind, often taking a back seat to flowering crabapples and weak wooded flowering pears. This may be due to the notion that cherries are short lived, disease prone, and just not hardy for the Midwest, even though there are cultivars that can thrive for decades.

Form and size are, or at least should be a primary factor in considering an ornamental for any garden. Cherry species and cultivars offer several variations of growth habits from the more common weepers to lesser known columnar forms. Most commonly noticed in early spring are the fountains of single pink flowers cascading from the often high grafted weeping higan cherry (Prunus subhirtella var. pendula). These are reasonably hardy in the Midwest and fairly fast growing. Snow fountains weeping cherry (Prunus ‘Snofozam’) is a smaller weeper with early white blossoms sometimes seen snow covered. One serves as the focal point on the south island in Fernwood’s Japanese Garden. This weeper has a lower naturally mounded form and has remained close to 6 feet tall for many years. On the other hand the columnar sargent cherry (Prunus sargentii ‘Spire’) can get to 30 feet tall
with only one third the width after a few decades. The standard sargent cherry has glossy dark green summer foliage with bronze red fall color across glossy maroon bark. If you prefer something in between the upright and weeping forms Prunus ‘Hally Jolivette’ might be what you’re after. This hybrid back cross grows as a large shrub or small low branched tree with a succession of pink to white delicate flowers blooming over a span of about 3 weeks.

When it comes to color Kwanzan cherries (Prunus serrulata ‘Kwanzan’) cannot be missed in mid spring with huge double pink blossoms plastering the branches of a high grafted head. This somewhat upright spreading tree also offers a rich bronze golden fall color – a good reminder that cherries can provide more than just a spring show. Cherries can even provide winter interest with striking white dots (lenticels) on smooth burgundy bark. In protected areas the evergreen cherry-laurel (Prunus laurocerasus) holds it’s waxy dark green foliage all winter in the form of a short evergreen.

For showy cooking fruit tart cherries (Prunus cerasus) are hard to beat if you get to them before the birds. Bright white flowers on almost blackish bark are quite striking in spring. Sweet cherries (Prunus avium) are fun to pick in summer, but unlike tart cherries most cultivars require another compatible cultivar for cross pollination and fruit set. Most cherries are insect pollinated and provide a good food source for these pollinators early in the season.

With such a variety of form and seasonal color, cherries offer much more that tasty treats for gardeners and wildlife and should be strongly considered in the home landscape.

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