

Tree of the Month, December 2014: Birchbark cherry (*Prunus serrula*)

Birchbark cherry (*Prunus serrula*) has gleaming copper-coloured bark that stands out wonderfully in the winter garden. The outer bark is constantly peeling away to reveal the shining inner bark. The finely serrated green leaves (*serrula* is Latin for “little saw”) emerge in late April. The flowers, which have five white petals and plenty of stamens, bloom in the spring, and small red fruits develop in the autumn. The bark is by far the most impressive feature, so *Prunus serrula* is often planted for winter interest.

Birchbark cherry is native to the mountains of western China. The first European to describe the tree was Père Jean Marie Delavay, a French Catholic missionary who served in Yunnan in the 1880s. Delavay collected plants and sent them back to Adrien Franchet, a botanist at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris. Birchbark cherry was introduced to western horticulture in the early 20th Century by plant hunters Ernest Wilson and George Forrest, who travelled China searching for new plants for the British nursery trade.

At VanDusen we have eight birchbark cherries (see map on reverse), ranging in age from six years to forty. As the trees get older the bark gets darker and rougher – the outer layer can get ratty and cling. The outer strips of bark can be peeled off to maintain the shine. *Prunus serrula* bark is a strong, flexible, semi-transparent natural polymer film – if you lay a strip of the bark over a book or computer screen, you can read right through it!

In Vancouver’s damp climate, birchbark cherry will often catch bacterial canker, which ruins the shine of the bark. Our nicest-looking specimen is a seedling from some older, grafted trees purchased from a nursery. Grafted trees are more susceptible to bacterial canker than those grown from seed, which may be why our seedling is so handsome. To help prevent bacterial canker, plant trees in open spaces to allow air flow around the trunk and branches.