

Bloedel Plant Profile – The Surinam Cherry



The Surinam Cherry tree has edible fruit, which when ripe, hang like tiny red lanterns. One grows near the wall and bamboo fence by the raised brick seating area.

This tree grows wild along the east coast of South America, from Surinam to southern Brazil. It has many other names such as Brazil Cherry¹ and Cayenne Cherry. These names are misleading as the tree and fruit are not cherries! Botanically, the Surinam Cherry is *Eugenia uniflora*. It is a member of the *Eugenia* genus, part of the Myrtle family.² Cloves, guavas and eucalyptus are also in this family. True cherries are in the *Prunus* genus, part of the Rose family.³

For those who want to know the ‘seedy details’; cherries are drupes. They have a fleshy outer part with a stone (the pit or shell) containing a seed (the kernel) within. They are members of the ‘stone fruit family’. This family includes plums, peaches, apricots and almonds. They are part of the bigger Rose family. In contrast, Surinam cherries have between one and three seeds per fruit and they do not have a hard pit around the seed. Botanically, the fruit of the Surinam Cherry is a berry, not a cherry.



The ripe fruit is edible, but does not taste like a cherry. One description of the taste is ‘similar to a mango’.⁴ Another is ‘like a green bell-pepper’.⁵ Unripe fruit, though not poisonous, are not good to eat: ‘the unripe ones are green and orange and they taste dreadful, like gasoline.’⁶

¹ This is not a good name as there is another *Eugenia* species known as the Brazil cherry, *Eugenia dombeyi*. For details see: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231790696_Brazil_cherry_Eugenia_dombeyi_-_An_underutilized_fruit_species_of_the_American_tropics

² <https://www.britannica.com/plant/Myrtaceae>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-plants-in-the-family-Rosaceae-2001612>

⁴ <https://healthfully.com/275240-the-benefits-of-surinam-cherry-fruit.html>

⁵ https://www.specialtyproduce.com/produce/Surinam_Cheries_8821.php

⁶ <https://www.suwanneerose.com/2017/05/surinam-cherry-sambal/>

One problem with the plant as a food source is that the fruit does not ripen all at once and so picking ripe fruit is very labour intensive. Harvesting of ripe fruit should be once or twice daily. In practice, this makes the fruit too expensive to grow commercially. The fruit only lasts for one day at room temperature and up to a week refrigerated.⁷ Harvesting of Surinam cherries is generally for home use only.

As well as the wild deep red Surinam cherry, there are also some black cultivars⁸ that are sweeter and less resinous in taste.⁹ Although a plant grown from seed from a cultivar will not be exactly the same, generally both red and black types grow true from seed.¹⁰



Various Stages of Ripeness

There are many uses for the fruit. Some people like them freshly picked. In practice, they are more palatable if split, deseeded and chilled for 2-3 hours. If sprinkled with sugar before cooling,

they will become mild and sweet and will exude much juice. They can replace strawberries on shortcake, or be served topped with whipped cream. They are an excellent addition to fruit cups, salads, custard pudding and ice cream. Other uses include pies, sauces, jam, jelly, relish and pickles. Vinegar, wine and spirits may be prepared from the juice.¹¹



Surinam Cherry
Eugenia uniflora

⁷ <https://gardenoracle.com/images/eugenia-uniflora.html>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QODQQ3AVQF4>

⁹ https://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/morton/surinam_cherry.html

¹⁰ <http://www.tradewindsfruit.com/content/surinam-cherry.htm>

¹¹ <https://www.kitchenbutterfly.com/2012/11/13/cook-naija-pitanga-cherry-dessert/>

There are many health benefits claimed for the fruit.¹² These, in terms of anti-oxidants, vitamins and minerals are essentially the same as obtained by eating most other fresh fruit. The leaves contain a number of essential oils. Traditional medicine uses an infusion of the leaves. Surinam Cherry ‘tea’ may have a number of health benefits.¹³

Birds spread the seeds and in regions where it survives outdoors it can be invasive. In 2019 in Florida, it is an ‘Invasive Exotic Category 1’.¹⁴

The Surinam Cherry, *Eugenia uniflora*, is probably the best known of the *Eugenia* genus. The name ‘Eugenia’ honours Prince Eugene of Savoy, 1663-1736. He was a patron of botany and horticulture. He was one of the best generals in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. Success in war made him exceedingly wealthy. At one time he may have been the richest man in Europe,¹⁵ possibly the world.¹⁶ His fame now is almost entirely due to the plants that bear his name. The ‘*uniflora*’ part of the name means ‘one flower.’

¹² <https://www.fruitsinfo.com/surinam-cherry.php#Health-Benefits-of-Surinam-Cherry>

¹³ <http://theindianvegan.blogspot.com/2013/02/all-about-pitanga.html>

¹⁴ <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/plant-directory/eugenia-uniflora/>

¹⁵ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/german-history-biographies/eugene-savoy>

¹⁶ <http://www.eattheweeds.com/surinam-cherry-only-ripe-need-apply/>