
History, Use & Economic Importance Of The Saskatoon

Richard G. St-Pierre, Ph.D. (December 2005)

Historically, the saskatoon was important to many North American Indian peoples, and later, European explorers and settlers.

The saskatoon was a popular and widely used plant among many North American Indian tribes. Both flowers and fruit were important in native ceremonies. Holding a fruit up to the sun and then burying it in the ground was a thanksgiving to the earth for its abundance of gifts. Saskatoon blossoms symbolized spring in the tobacco-planting ceremony of the Blackfoot. The Sun Dance was held in July when the fruit were ripe. Klamath Indian legends relate that the first people were created from saskatoon bushes.

The fruit were a staple food. The saskatoon, along with the chokecherry and buffaloberry, were often the only kind of fruit available in any quantity. Because of their importance, most tribes distinguished different kinds of saskatoons on the basis of fruit color, taste, seediness and size, in addition to blooming time, ripening time, bush form, and habitat. The Okanagan Indians distinguished eight different kinds of saskatoon, varying in their suitability for eating fresh or drying. Many tribes held ceremonies and feasts to celebrate the beginning of the saskatoon harvest.

The fruit were eaten fresh and prepared in a variety of ways. Fruit were steamed and mashed, made into cakes, and then dried to a brick-like consistency. Pieces were chipped off as needed and added to soups, stews, or boiled to reconstitute them. Pemmican was a mixture of dried lean meat (bison, moose or deer), which was ground or pounded, mixed with an equal amount of melted fat, mixed with saskatoons, and moulded into cakes. Pemmican would keep for months if stored in a cool, dry place and was a winter staple of the Plains Indian tribes. Young shredded shoots, mashed dried fruit, and dry leaves were used to make a tea. The fruit were also used by the Thompson and Interior Salish tribes to produce a dye. Dried saskatoons were a common item of trade.

Several parts of the shrub were used medicinally. Concoctions of the inner bark and roots were used to treat diarrhea, dysentery, painful menstruation, and bleeding during pregnancy. A warm decoction of the stems and twigs, or bark, was used by the women of the Thompson Indians to treat pain and bleeding after giving birth to a child. A root tea was believed to prevent miscarriage. The fruit were also used, along with spruce tips, blue currants, and snowberry leaves and stems, as part of a concoction for gonorrhoea. Some

tribes boiled the inner bark of the saskatoon to produce a remedy for snowblindness; one drop of the strained fluid was placed in the affected eye three times daily. Fruit concoctions were also used for sore eyes and stomach problems.

The wood has a straight grain, and is hard and strong. It was used for arrows and other tools, basket-frames and cross-pieces for canoes.

Fruit of the saskatoon and related *Amelanchier* species also were popular with European explorers and settlers. It is recorded that the fruit of the saskatoon were used by the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who refer to a bread of serviceberries and ground lamb's quarters. Pemmican was adopted by fur-traders and voyageurs. The saskatoon was often the only fruit available to early prairie settlers and was an important food source for victims of drought and depression in the 1930's. The green fruit were crushed and used to treat diarrhea. Juice from the ripe fruit was used as a laxative, and to treat stomachache. European settlers used wood of various *Amelanchier* species to make umbrella handles and fish poles.

The City of Saskatoon apparently derived its name in 1882 or 1883 (the date is contentious) from the fruit which grew abundantly along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, being named by temperance leader John Lake. After being brought a handful of red fruit which appeared similar to red currants, and which he was told were called saskatoons (the anglicized version of the Cree name), Lake is said to have exclaimed 'Arise Saskatoon,

Queen of the North' (the truth of this story is uncertain). This was in August of 1882 or 1883, well past the usual period when saskatoon fruit normally ripen. The usual color of ripe fruit is purple to blue-black, never red. It's quite possible that these fruit were actually chokecherries!

The first recorded *Amelanchier* cultivar was Success, which was introduced in 1878, and grown in Illinois. Success apparently originated in Pennsylvania from seed of *A. canadensis*. In Canada, the domestication of the saskatoon was initiated by W.D. Albright at Agriculture Canada's Beaverlodge Research Station in Alberta in 1918, when a hedgerow of wild saskatoons was established. The first selections of saskatoons were made from this hedgerow in 1928 by W.T. Macoun. About this time, John Wallace, a nurseryman in the region, was also selecting saskatoons from the wild near Barrhead, Alberta. Collaboration between Wallace and Albright resulted in an exchange of plant material. The cultivars Smoky and Pembina were not formally released until 1952, but it was clear by 1932 that the selections on which these cultivars were based were superior.

The first commercial saskatoon orchards were established in the early 1970's and a second wave was established in the late 1980's and early 1990's. The primary variety initially used was Smoky because only this variety was available in adequate quantities. With the advent of appropriate techniques for micropropagation, large quantities of many cultivars have become available. Most saskatoon orchards are now primarily comprised of a mixture of the cultivars Smoky, Pembina, Northline,

Thiessen, Martin, and Honeywood, and secondarily, with some of the other cultivars that are available.

Accurate estimates of the total acreage of saskatoons planted to date are difficult to obtain. As of the publication date of this factsheet, it is estimated that there are approximately 500 to 800 hectares of saskatoons established in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, with about half producing fruit. There are approximately 250 to 300 growers of saskatoons and about 50% of the orchards are U-Pick operations. Orchard sizes range from 0.5 - 16 or more hectares. Two or more hectares is probably the minimum size for an economically viable commercial saskatoon orchard. Currently, demand for fruit exceeds supply. The saskatoon industry is in its infancy. It has been predicted that over 4,000 hectares of saskatoons will eventually be planted on the prairies.

herein. The information cannot be guaranteed because knowledge of the biology and culture of the saskatoon may not be applicable to all locations every year. Additionally, the information that is available often changes over time. Little scientific research has been done on many aspects of the culture and management of saskatoons. Consequently, this publication can only serve as a guide. All actions taken which are based on the information presented in this publication are solely the responsibilities of the readers or users, and the author is not liable for any direct, indirect, incidental, or consequential damages in connection with or arising from the furnishing, performance, or use of this material. Comments on information contained in this publication are welcomed.

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