



# BWSR Featured Plant

## American Wild Plum (*Prunus americana*)

Rose Family (Rosaceae)

Wetland Indicator Status:  
UPL



General growth form of American Plum

American Plum is a dense thicket forming shrub or small tree. It has small white flowers that attract pollinators. Its fruit is used in jams and jellies and is also enjoyed by many birds and animals. Along with eating the fruit, twigs, and leaves, wildlife use the dense thicket as a protected place for nesting and roosting. It is a common tree and grows along roadsides, field edges, and in disturbed open areas.



Plated and peeling bark

## Identification

The American Plum is a shrub or small tree that can grow up to 15 feet tall. It is thicket forming and can sucker from the roots. The branches are reddish-brown have flaking waxy cuticles and sharp 2 to 3 inch spines. The bark is dark brown or gray and as it grows older it becomes plated, curled, and peals.



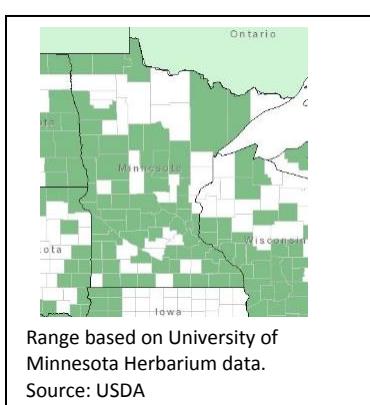
5-petaled flowers  
Sharply serrated leaves with sharp tip

The leaves are simple, alternate and have an elliptical shape. The tip of the leaves abruptly come to a sharp point. The edges of the leaves are sharply toothed. The upper surface is darker than the underside and usually not hairy. The undersurface is hairy and slightly lighter in color. The leaf stalk is usually hairy with two distinctive glands near the base of the leaf.

The flowers have five white petals and long stamens. The petals are rounded and oval shape. American plum flowers bloom in early spring, along with the emergence of the new leaves. The fruit is a dark red to purple drupe with some yellow and orange coloring and a single hard seed. When ripe the plums drop off the branches.

## Range

This plum is very widely distributed throughout the Eastern two thirds of North America and throughout Minnesota. It can grow in many environments including prairies, woodlands, pastures, and along roadsides. With the suppression of natural wildfires American Plums range has expanded. It is quick to colonize open fields and prairies when there is little competition.



Plum fruit is a cluster of drupes  
(Minnesota Wildflowers)



Branches have sharp spines that are 2-3 inches long



Thickets can be used as windbreaks

#### Primary Uses

- Windbreaks
- Natural barriers
- Food source
- Wildlife and bird habitat

## Uses

The American Plum has many uses. The fruit can be eaten and are used in jams and jellies. Because of its tendency to form thickets it can be used as a windbreak in agriculture fields. It can also be used as a natural barrier for recreation areas. Caution must be used because the branches have sharp spines. American Plum thickets are an important refuge for birds and other wildlife. It provides a protected area for nesting, loafing, and roosting. Whitetail deer, squirrels, raccoons and other wildlife eat the fruit. A wide range of pollinators including native bees and flies and honeybees use the flowers as an early season source of nectar and pollen.



Photo by Dan Shaw

## Planting Recommendations

American Plum can grow in a variety of locations. It prefers sandy to sandy loam soils and can adapt to survive small amounts of flooding. It spreads through seeds and by suckering in the root system.

Containerized plants can be found at some native plant nurseries. Seedlings can be transplanted fairly easily and successfully by digging sprouts along with their fibrous roots growing on the edge of thickets in early spring or late fall when the plant is dormant. Plum seeds should be planted a couple inches deep and in early fall so they are naturally stratified over the winter.

#### Planting Methods

- Seeds
- Containerized plants

## Similar Species

### Canada Plum (*Prunus nigra*)

Canada Plum and American Plum are very similar. The Canada Plum grows more commonly in forests and prefers more acidic soils. It also has broader leaves with a blunt tip. The flowers have red sepals, instead of green sepals like the American Plum. The Canada Plum has a more open form and does not form as dense of thickets as the American Plum.



Canada plum leaves are rounder and have blunt tips



Canada Plum with red sepals  
(Minnesota Wildflowers)



General growth form of Canada Plum

## References

Minnesota Wildflowers: <https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/tree/wild-plum>

USDA: <http://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=pram>

Trees and Shrubs of Minnesota