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COLUMN DIGGING IN *By Jackie French*



Jackie French's book is *The Secret Life of Wombats*.

A basketful of **CHERRIES**

The cherries are in the shops now, rich and ripe. If you're ever stuck for a present at this time of year, you can't go wrong with a box of cherries. There are few things in life that taste so luxurious and are so good for you, filled with antioxidants, anti-inflammatory substances, vitamins and sheer luscious, juicy deliciousness, that it seems a crime to even mention their health aspects.

But good as commercial cherries are, like all fruits they are so much more stellar picked fresh from the tree, eaten sun-warmed and sweet. Every fruit loses some of its fragrance the longer it's picked and cherries are no exception. Cool storage means they lose even more flavour, and cherries are so tender and prone to rotting that they must be cool-stored for them to get to the shops and you.

The solution? A backyard cherry tree, or even three or four, because you can have early and late varieties of cherries. Choose the right ones and go for dwarf cherries that won't grow more than two metres high.

You can grow the most perfect varieties, the ones that rarely get into the shops, such as white cherries and pink cherries and sour Morella cherries, which make the best jam in the universe. (Quandongs and a few other fruits make the best jam in the universe, too — they just tie for first place.)

Growing cherry trees was once a dicey business because you had to plant two varieties to pollinate each other's flowers and, if your garden is like mine, the wretched trees would never flower at the right time. For decades we'd get maybe half a dozen cherries from two giant trees. The sour cherries fruited well, though, for cherry jam and stewed cherries. Cherries also need chilling, but no late frosts. In other words, when it came to fussiness, cherry trees were worse than two-year-olds.

No longer. A decade ago I began to plant self-pollinating cherry varieties — only one tree needed for pollinated fruit — and new varieties that needed less chilling, too. And now, at last, we are getting cherries.

A good tree to begin with is Stella. She pollinates herself, so



she doesn't need a perfect match, and she fruits in warmish climates, even in Sydney. But ask at your local garden centre; they should stock the ones that do best or will fruit in your area. These days, most in the garden centre are low-chill, self-pollinators and dwarf or semi-dwarf trees. Another reason for growing dwarf cherries is that it's easier for you to reach them without a ladder and you can cover them with bird netting to keep most of the crop safe. (I reckon birds deserve a bit of each crop, as they live here, too.)

If you live in the warm-temperate to subtropics or tropics, try a Capulin cherry (*Prunus solicifolia*). This isn't a "real" cherry but the deep purple fruit with its green flesh looks and tastes like one and it's incredibly hardy and fast-growing. There isn't quite as much flesh around the stone as there is in the big, fat, cold-climate ones. But they are still a treat. Best of all, they crop over a month instead of having to harvest them all in a week — and the trees get so big that there are plenty for you and the birds.

Capulin cherries have a mass of white, slightly fragrant flowers. They are very, very fast-growing, especially in hot climates and given lots of water, but they tolerate light frosts, too, and sometimes heavy ones, as at our place.

Capulin cherries grow reasonably true to type from seed but they grow from cuttings, too. Plant about a metre of hardwood branch, thrust half a metre into damp soil and kept damp for about a year until the roots are well-grown before you transplant. The two things Capulins don't like are bad drainage, ie wet, boggy soil, and salt winds. They may not like salty soil, either.

Another word of warning: you should get fruit at about three years from planting seed, or the first year after planting a metre-high tree, but it may be a bit bitter at first. Wait a year or two and the fruit will become sweeter and more fragrant. Capulins grow tall but can be pruned to a small size, even to a hedge.

In other words, there are cherries for everyone, from cold climates where you need to grow your cherry against a warm, sunny wall in case the blossoms are hit by a late frost (the retained heat will help protect it) to the tropics. And, once they are fully grown, cherries are wonderfully hardy.

There are two old trees next door that have lost their leaves many of the past decades in late frosts, in drought and with pear and cherry slug (try a spray of flour and water over them). I think they must be the world's worst-placed cherry trees and totally neglected, too. But they are still alive. And some years, they even produce a mass of cherries. With some good planning, though, you can grow hardier small trees and have baskets every year of one of the most luscious summer fruits of all. ☺



CHERRY KISSEL

If we have a crop of cherries — or plums or apricots — that's too big to eat, give away or process, I shove bags of whole fruit into the freezer, stems and all, so I can use them when there aren't so many harvests in winter. Frozen cherries are great for this dish.

- 4 cups cherries, sweet or sour
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup port
- Sugar or honey to taste
- 1 stick cinnamon
- 1 tbsp maize cornflour

Simmer everything but the flour and half the water for about an hour on a very low heat. Mix the flour with the other half-cup of water, then quickly stir into the fruit mix, very fast, stirring well so it doesn't go lumpy. Keep stirring on a low heat for 10 minutes. The syrup will thicken a little. Take it off the heat and cool. The syrup will now thicken even more.

Serve the almost-set kissel in glasses so you can enjoy its red glow with thick yoghurt, cream or icecream.