

Cherry-plum or Myrobalan (*Prunus cerasifera*)

Originally from SE Europe/SW Asia Cherry-plums are now naturalised in the UK and are very common on the Ham Lands. They are the first trees of the year to delight us with their blossom. Their early supply of nectar and pollen is especially important for insects. Cherry-plums have been planted as hedges, ornamental trees and used as grafting stock.



Description: Small trees, sometimes with suckers and sometimes with thorns. The trunks have smooth brown or dark grey bark with horizontal lenticels, resembling a dull version of Wild Cherry, but they soon become rough and greyish with age. The young twigs are slender, usually green, at least on the underside and not hairy; the buds are small. The lightly almond scented flowers open before the leaves, or with them, they are borne singly and have pure white petals (but pink forms also occur). The light green leaves are somewhat glossy above and have a saw-like margin. The fruits are yellow, sometimes with orange streaks or light red and they lack bloom (powdery dusting). The stone is flattened, more like a plum than a cherry. It is thought that fruit infrequently develop in the UK because the flowers open so early that fewer pollinators are available and there is danger of frost damage. However, as we have many young saplings (as well as suckers), fruiting would seem to be not such a rare occurrence.

Variability: Our wild Cherry-plums are quite variable, especially flower size and length of flower stalk. A few trees with bronze tinged foliage can be found on the Ham Lands. There are also many named cultivated forms. Several varieties have very dark reddish black or copper-coloured leaves, one of the most popular is known as 'Pissardii'. The planted specimens (by Thames Young Mariner's entrance and those towards the Hawker Centre, Kingston) have larger, often pink flowers on longer stalks. The ones by TYM regularly bear delicious yellow or red Cherry-plums.

Confusing names

Plum-cherry (sometimes given as Cherry-plum) is a hybrid between a Japanese plum (*Prunus salicina*) and our native Wild Cherry (*Prunus avium*). There are many cultivated forms with names such as 'CherryYum' or 'Verry Cherry Plum'.

Mirabelle Plums Some authorities suggest Mirabelle is a cultivated variety of Cherry-plum (*P. cerasifera*), while others suggest that it is a form of Plum, *P. domestica* × *cerea* (= subsp. *cerea*, = subsp. *syriaca*) or even a sweet form of Bullace, *P. domestica* subsp. *instita*. A few authorities say Mirabelle fruit are always red, but yellow varieties seem predominant. Cultivated forms of Mirabelle tend to be given places names e.g., 'Mirabelle de Nancy' or 'Mirabelle von Herrenhausen'.

Galls known as **Pocket Plum** are caused by a fungus *Taphrina prunii* (or other species). Sometimes reddish, often chilli-like, growths can be found just after flowering. Normal fruit can still develop at the usual time. There was a considerable, eye-catching infestation in 2019.

Sloe / Blackthorne (*Prunus spinosa*) is sometimes confused with Cherry-plum. Although Sloes flower later, flowering times can occasionally overlap. Sloes form dense thorny clumps (rather than trees or bushes); the flowers are a little smaller and a less pure white than Cherry-plum; the fruit are dark purplish-blue with a strong bloom. There are several thickets on HL North (but not South). Also, a good clump by the Hawker Centre entrance (not strictly HL).

Other trees produce flowers before the leaves. Most are wind pollinated and have inconspicuous flowers grouped in catkins or tassels. Look out for **Hazel** (long yellow catkins), **Willows** (oval greyish or velvety catkins), **Elm** (reddish catkins) and possibly **Oak** (greenish catkins) but these tends to flower later. **Norway Maple** is insect pollinated and has clusters of small, acid green flowers (**Sycamore** flowers a little later with dangling bunches).

Enjoy finding cherry-plums

You will be sure to find Cherry-plums on any early Springtime walk. They are scattered throughout Ham Lands where their welcome white blossom joyfully advertises their whereabouts. The map indicates locations with interesting examples that are well worth visiting. At this time of year some paths get very muddy and are best avoided. Please plan your walk carefully. You may prefer to visit different locations on separate occasions.

1. Entrance to TYM, a fine row of cultivated forms with green and copper foliage, and white or pink flowers. These usually produce delicious fruit, both red and yellow. In years of abundance, stones from the high branches litter the pavement.
2. Two groves of Wild Cherry, although not yet flowering, contrast with 3. This area can be muddy!
3. A fine mature Cherry-plum tree surrounded by younger ones.
4. The tow path from Ham House car park and the TYM bridge has plenty of Cherry-plum blossom and is easy walking.
5. Pause on the TYM bridge to enjoy a pink and white flowered forms growing closely intertwined.
6. Two nice clumps on HL South and one at the Lock.
7. Near the Hawker Centre (not strictly HL) there are some nice varieties with larger white and pink flowers.

