

# AGRI-FACTS

Practical Information for Alberta's Agriculture Industry

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## Saskatoons in Alberta

Saskatoons are native to Alberta. The Plains Indians ate the fruit both fresh and dried in their dietary staple pemmican. Thousands of acres are now commercially produced on the Canadian prairies, but this factsheet will focus on home garden saskatoon production.

Today, the saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) is valued for its fruit and as an ornamental shrub or hedge. The shrub is tall and upright with a spreading form. Early in the spring, before the leaves are fully out, clusters of white blossoms appear. The fall color of this shrub also makes it an outstanding addition to the landscape.

The fruit is excellent when eaten fresh, cooked in pies and desserts, canned, frozen or made into wine or juice. Saskatoons are self-fertile, but they seem to do better when grown in groups.

### Location and soils

Saskatoons thrive on most soils with plenty of organic matter. They need good drainage as the plant does not like wet roots. They prefer slightly acidic soils but will grow reasonably well on alkaline soils with a pH of up to 7.5.

Saskatoons bloom early, making them highly susceptible to early spring frosts. Locations with a gentle slope and good air drainage are ideal for cultivation.

### Propagation

Saskatoons can be propagated from seed, root sprouts (suckers) or tissue culture. Seedling and tissue cultured plant material is available from numerous nurseries throughout the province.

Collect the fruit as soon as it ripens, and clean the fruit pulp from the seed. Clean seed can be sown in the fall, and germination will occur in the following spring.

Plant material is collected in early spring when plants are dormant. Dig out young suckers with as many fine roots as possible. Cut back tops to a height of 5 cm, plant and keep them well watered.

The first crop may be expected in about three or four years from planting. Peak production will take another two or three years.

### Planting

Plant saskatoons in hedge rows 0.6 to 1 m apart and 4 to 6 m apart between rows.

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### Annual fertilization

Measure 150 mL of 23-23-0 or 27-14-0 fertilizer with a liquid measuring cup, and apply under the branches and to 30 cm beyond each plant. Fertilize between flowering and harvest time.

### Cultivation

Cultivation controls weeds that compete for moisture, and it also destroys or covers up any diseased berries on the ground. This practice helps control disease and insect problems in the crop. Shallow cultivation prevents damage to the fragile roots.

### Pruning

Saskatoons produce fruit on the previous year's growth and on older wood. Generally, the younger, more vigorous branches yield the best quality fruit.

Pruning should be done early in the spring after the danger of severe cold weather has passed, but before bud break. Prune to control the height of the bushes; a height of 2 m is ideal. Remove all

diseased, damaged and weak growth. Cut off low branches and thin the center to keep it open.

After the plants are 6 to 7 years old, prune out a few 5- to 7-year-old branches yearly to encourage new and vigorous shoot growth. Older shrubs can be rejuvenated by cutting them back to ground level and allowing new sprouts to grow.

## Irrigation

Watering is required to establish young plants. Ensure the soil is kept evenly moist at this time. Once the plants are established, supplemental water will aid in the production of plump, juicy berries. Water the plants from blossoming until harvest.

The average amount of water required by the plant is 15 to 25 mm per week, but this amount depends greatly on the soil type and the weather conditions. Hot dry winds will increase the need for water; cool weather decreases requirements. Soils with high levels of organic matter or clay do not require as much water as sandy soils do.

## Bird protection

The use of plastic netting is one of the best ways to protect the ripening fruit from the birds. Colorful streamers, aluminum pie tins and noise makers will work temporarily until the birds learn that these devices are not a threat. Plastic owls will also deter the birds, but they must be moved around in the planting to successfully fool the birds.

## Harvesting

Harvest the berries when they turn from pink to deep purple. Saskatoons ripen fairly evenly, and most of the crop can be picked at one time.

## Cultivars

*Smoky*: Large, round, fleshy, sweet, mild-flavored fruit. Shrub is upright and spreading, very productive and suckers freely.

*Northline*: Upright spreading form, very productive, produces sweet fruit within three years, suckers freely.

*Thiessen*: Large pleasant-flavored fruit, uneven fruit ripening.

*Honeywood*: Vigorous, blooms late. Large pleasant tasting fruit with few seeds. Produces heavy within three or four years.

For information on commercial saskatoon production in Alberta, contact

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