

## Barbados Cherry

*(Malpighia) puniceifolia (Dwarf)*

*coccigera (Singapore Holly) glabra (Barbados Cherry-Acerola) pendiculata (Weeping Malpighia)*

*Brought to you by ArtisanWorks, Kagawong, ON*

*(Most of the included information is obtained from several online sources.)*

General Information: The name, Malpighia, is used to honor Marcello Malpighia (1628-1693). He was a distinguished naturalist at Bologna, Italy. Dwarf shrub, evergreen opposite short petiole, spiny toothed leaves. Open, pink flowers and red fruit. There are three varieties of malpighia which are used as bonsai subjects. Each has unique characteristics. In their native tropical American environment, they may be found in the under story of tropical forests or on rocky hill sides near streams where the soil is rich and moist. Plants may be obtained by collecting during the summer months, but can also be purchased from a nursery or started from seed, hard or soft wood cuttings or root cuttings taken in the summer.

The dwarf variety (*puniceifolia*) is an outstanding bonsai candidate as it flowers freely throughout the year and has beautiful fire engine red colored fruit. Because of its small size it is also ideal as a container plant. This variety grows to only 2 -3 feet and can withstand colder temperatures than other varieties, to 22°F (once established.) The light requirements of the Dwarf Cherry are moderate, allowing it to grow in partial shade or even indoors. It's demand for water is high and it shouldn't be allowed to dry out for extended periods of time. It is recommended to use a well-draining soil and watering it often, especially when in bloom or fruiting.

The fruit: Cherries from the *M. puniceifolia* are very small (just over 1cm long) and red when ripening. The taste is rumored to be sweet in some varieties, although most find the taste to be rather bland. If one could compare the taste to anything it would probably be a mild tomato. You will find a miniature seed inside of each cherry, but don't get too excited about sprouting it, germination is very difficult with this plant. There are blooming cycles that are activated by numerous factors such as day length, temperature, and water. No one knows of any way to positively stimulate the plant to produce more cycles, but typically you can expect about 3-6 cycles a year in a mature plant. Disappointingly, most flowers never turn into fruits, either due to difficulty in pollination or the plant's burden to produce a large quantity of fruit. You will notice that many of these plants have ten or more flower clusters on one branch so there is at least a lot of chances for fruits. When pollination occurs the flower will lose all of its petals and then either shrivel up or develop a green fruit that will eventually mature and ripen red.

## CARE

General Care:

Temperature: Protect (bring indoors) when temperatures threaten to drop below 45°F. Malpighias are sub-tropical, so temperature below 45° may damage the leaves and freezing will kill the bonsai. To set flower buds, the night temperatures must be above 60°F.

Lighting: Tolerant of any sun position, full sun is best for small leaves, bloom and fruit, however caution should be taken and the tree should be protected from full sun in the hottest months. Five hours of sunlight in the morning during the winter is ideal and, in the summer, they can have filtered sun or shade. If growing them under fluorescent lights, they require 14-16 hours of light a day.

Watering: Malpighia do not like to stay wet. Water frequently, but allow the soil to dry slightly between waterings. Do not let a malpighia completely dry-out. However, over watering causes yellow leaves, and so does too much sun. And, water on the blooms ruins them. Malpighia *pendiculata* and *glabra* do not like to stay wet. *M. coccigera* likes heavy watering.

**Fertilizing:** This plant is a heavy feeder during the spring and summer. For optimum bloom, using a dilute application daily or a full application of fertilizer weekly is a good idea. Alternate between a super phosphate and a balanced 20-20-20 with minors is a plus. Watch for yellowing leaves, if this occurs an application of chelated iron will take care of it. Using an organic fertilizer may be preferred. pH6.0-7.5

**Pruning / Training:** Wiring can be used but care should be taken as the growth is fairly brittle. Clip and grow are very important with this plant. If branches are allowed to get too long, they will drop leaves at the back and have leggy bare growth. If this occurs, clip back to the last 2 leaves, it will back bud from this, and you can continue to clip back as the new growth appears. *Malpighia pendiculata* does not bud back easily on old wood. Regular pinching is necessary.

**Insects / Pests:** Aphids, scales and mites are rare but may occur. Aphids are the most devastating, they primarily attack the young flower buds and leaves. Mainly free but prune to allow light and air into the center of tree, also allow the soil to dry slightly between waterings to prevent root rot. Nematodes and pathogens are other common problems.

**Propagation:** Cuttings. Take soft wood cuttings in April, place cuttings in compost with bottom heat 70°-77°F.  
\*\*\**M. glabra* can be air-layered.\*\*\*

**Repotting:** Only repot when night temperatures are a minimum of low to mid 60's°F. Repotting can be done anytime during the summer. They prefer a slightly acid (pH 5.5 to 6.5) rich, moist but porous, well-drained soil, Peat moss, garden soil, leaf mold and sharp sand in equal amounts is a good soil mix. The soil should be pasteurized as malpighias are highly subject to nematodes. *Malpighia* seem to flower and fruit better when some organic material is added.

**Design and Styling:** Any bonsai style can be used on the Barbados Cherry.

Some species suitable for bonsai: *Malpighia coccigera*, known as Singapore holly, southern holly, Florida holly, or miniature holly and is native to the West Indies. Its natural form is that of a low shrub. It has leathery, dark green, glossy holly shaped leaves. Flowers are pale pink, about the size of a dime, five fringed petals. Tip pruning does not sacrifice bloom. Blooms are all along the branch. Mature growth is woody, with grayish, bark, somewhat stiff in character. New growth tends to be horizontal. The Singapore holly lends itself to a variety of styles, including root over rock. *Malpighia glabra*, or Barbados cherry (*Acerola*) is native in southern Texas, the West Indies, northern South America, Central America and Mexico. Its natural form is that of a shrub or small tree 10 to 15 feet tall. It has leaves which are oval with pointed ends, neither glossy nor leathery, very dark green and small in size. Branches are flexible, the flower is rose-pink and the fruit is edible, a rich source of Vitamin C. Barbados cherry usually looks best in an informal upright style. *Malpighia pendiculata* or weeping malpighia. Its natural form is that of a low shrub with pendulous, weeping twigs and branches. The flowers are rose pink, often several together in a cyme. Its fruit is small and inedible. It has a weeping growth habit, cracked branches will heal, and leaves are pointed.

***Malpighia puniceifolia*— Dwarf Barbados Cherry—**

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