Prunus cerasifera ‘Thundercloud’: ‘Thundercloud’ Cherry Plum

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

Introduction

‘Thundercloud’ Purple-Leaf plum has new foliage which unfolds as ruby red, then turns reddish-purple for the rest of the growing season. Its fast growth rate and upright to upright-spreading nature quickly forms a 15 to 25-foot-tall, dense silhouette. The small, white to light pink, fragrant springtime flowers, which usually appear before the leaves unfold, are followed by a heavy crop of edible, one-inch-diameter purple fruits.

General Information

Scientific name: Prunus cerasifera
Pronunciation: PROO-nus sair-uh-SIFF-er-uh
Common name(s): ‘Thundercloud’ Cherry Plum, ‘Thundercloud’ Purple-Leaf Plum
Family: Rosaceae
USDA hardiness zones: 5A through 8A (Fig. 2)
Origin: not native to North America
Invasive potential: little invasive potential
Uses: specimen; container or planter; shade
Availability: not native to North America

Figure 1. Middle-aged Prunus cerasifera ‘Thundercloud’: ‘Thundercloud’ Cherry Plum
Credits: Ed Gilman

Figure 2. Range


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Description

Height: 15 to 25 feet
Spread: 15 to 25 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: round, vase
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: moderate
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: serrate
Leaf shape: ovate, elliptic (oval), obovate
Leaf venation: pinnate, brachidodrome
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches, 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: purple/red
Fall color: purple
Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: white/cream/gray, pink
Flower characteristics: showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: 1 to 3 inches
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: purple
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; not showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: branches don’t droop; not showy; typically one trunk; thorns
Pruning requirement: little required
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: reddish, brown
Current year twig thickness: thin
Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; slightly alkaline; acidic; well-drained
Drought tolerance: moderate
Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: not a problem
Winter interest: no
Outstanding tree: no
Ozone sensitivity: unknown
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible
Pest resistance: sensitive to pests/diseases

Use and Management

Very popular due to the unusual leaf color, many gardeners want one of these things in their yard. But one plant really attracts attention to an area, and it can be overpowering in a small landscape creating a cramped feeling. Due to the strong effect, best used in a large-scale landscape as a single specimen, not in a row or mass planting. It makes a nice, small ornamental near the deck or patio but locate it far enough away so dropping fruit will fall on the lawn or in a groundcover bed. Do not rely on this tree to be around for a long time since decline often begins by the time the tree is 10 to 15-years-old.

Purple-Leaf Plum should be grown in full sun to bring out the richest color of the leaves. Leaves turn almost green in shade and lose the characteristic purple which the buyer is usually looking for. Well-drained soil with an acid pH is preferred but it will grow on slightly alkaline soil. Tolerant of moderate heat and drought, it often succumbs to borers on poor, compacted soil.

Propagation is by cuttings.

Pests

This Cherry Plum is susceptible to aphids, borers, scales, mealy bugs, tent caterpillars and many others. It is not a pest-free plant.

Diseases

Canker and leaf spots.