


Lyis: *Prunus domestica* (Blue Plum)

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 LyisForestry

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1 Introduction to *Prunus domestica* (Blue Plum)

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1.1 Description of the Plant

The “Blue Plum” is a richly coloured selection of European plum (*Prunus domestica*), celebrated for its deep indigo skin, amber flesh, and high sugar content—perfect for fresh eating, preserves, and drying into prunes. A moderately vigorous, deciduous tree, it matures 3–5 m tall on semi-dwarf rootstock (6–7 m on seedling rootstock), forming a broadly oval crown. White, five-petalled blossoms open in mid-spring before leaf-out, dazzling bees and other early pollinators. Fruit ripens late August to mid-September in Ontario, oval to oblong (35–45 mm), with a naturally waxy bloom and a freestone pit that separates cleanly.

1.2 Historical and Cultural Context

European plums trace back to ancient Silk-Road hybridisations of cherry plum (*P. cerasifera*) and sloe (*P. spinosa*). By Roman times they were prized across the empire; Benedictine monks later spread improved cultivars throughout mediaeval Europe. Blue-skinned “prune” types arrived in North America with 18th-century German immigrants, thriving in the Great Lakes region. Their reliable self-fertility, cold hardiness (to -30°C), and ease of drying made them the homesteader’s plum of choice.

1.3 Edible, Medicinal, and Useful Properties

Edible:

- Fresh fruit: $\approx 80\%$ water, 10% natural sugars, rich in vitamins A & C and antioxidant anthocyanins.
- Drying: Converts to sweet prunes at $\approx 18\text{--}20\%$ moisture—ideal winter caloric store.
- Culinary: Excellent for jams, sauces, wine, and fermented plum vinegar (*ume-su* style).

Medicinal & Utility: Prunes are gentle natural laxatives (soluble fibre + sorbitol). Fruit skins yield a pale purple dye. The dense, fine-grained wood polishes well for turning and instrument parts.

Ecology: Early blossoms provide a vital nectar source; ripe windfall plums feed birds and pollinator larvae.

2 Planting Outdoors

1. **Site Selection** — Full sun ($\geq 6\text{ h day}^{-1}$); well-drained loam or sandy-loam, pH 6.0–7.0. Avoid frost pockets.
2. **Spacing** — 4–5 m between semi-dwarf trees; 5–6 m for seedling-rooted standards.
3. **Soil Preparation** — Loosen top 40 cm; blend in 5 cm compost plus 1 kg rock phosphate per planting hole.

4. **Pollination** — Most blue/prune plums are *self-fertile*; nevertheless, yields improve 20–30 % with a second European plum cultivar nearby (within 25 m).
5. **Companion Planting** — Under-plant with nitrogen fixers (clover, comfrey) and insectary herbs (mint, yarrow) to attract beneficials.

3 Ongoing Plant Care

1. **Watering** — 15–20 L weekly through dry spells for first 2 years; mature trees need ≈ 25 mm rain equivalent per week during fruit swell.
2. **Mulching** — 8 cm wood chips, leaving 10 cm clear of trunk; renew each spring.
3. **Fertilisation** — Early spring broadcast 120 g balanced organic fertiliser per trunk-diameter cm (DBH). Excess N raises black-knot risk.
4. **Pruning** — Late winter: shape to open-centre (vase) or modified leader, remove water-sprouts, and thin to 4–5 main scaffolds. Summer tip-prune for size control.
5. **Pest/Disease** — Monitor for plum curculio and black knot. Pick up wind-falls, prune out knots 15 cm beyond infection, and compost hot or burn.

4 Harvesting and Storage

- **Harvest Window:** Fruit detaches with a gentle twist when background colour turns from greenish to amber; soluble solids > 18 °Brix.
- **Fresh Storage:** Store at 0–2 °C, 90 % RH for up to 3 weeks.

- **Drying:** Halve or leave whole, dry at 60 °C until leathery (12–18 h); final moisture 20 %.
- **Freezing:** Halve, pit, flash-freeze on trays, then pack into containers for up to 12 months.

5 Propagation

- **Grafting:** Whip-and-tongue scion grafts onto Myrobalan or Krymsk 1 rootstock in early spring.
- **Seed:** Possible but variable; requires 90 days cold stratification.

6 Recipes and Uses

Baked Honey-Plum Crisp: Combine 1 L sliced plums, 60 mL honey, 5 mL lemon juice; top with 250 mL rolled oats mixed with 60 mL melted butter, bake 180 °C 40 min.

Plum Butter: Simmer 1 kg pitted plums with 125 mL maple syrup and 5 mL cinnamon until thick; purée and water-bath can 15 min.

Pressure-Steamed Plums: Add 250 mL water to cooker, rack, load 1 kg halved plums in jars; high pressure 5 min, natural release 10 min—perfect pie filling base.

7 Summary

Blue Plums combine Old-World heritage with modern reliability—self-fertile, cold-hardy, and richly flavoured. Whether eaten fresh, dried as prunes, or cooked into preserves, they bring a burst of late-summer sweetness to Ontario orchards and food forests. Plant a pair (or more) to enjoy decades of blossoms, shade, and indigo harvests.