

Once Upon a Wild Cherry



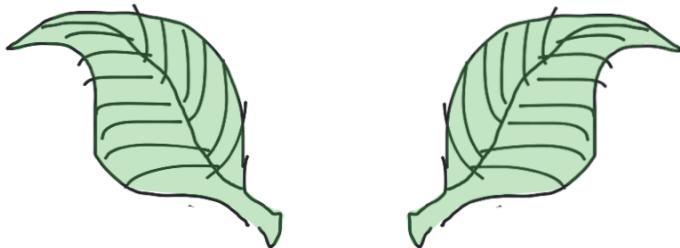
a children's tale & a poem

By Emily Xiao and Ivanna Soto-Medrano

Created for the Yale Nature Walk Project and E&EB 223L: Evolution, Functional Traits, and the Tree of Life

Spring 2017

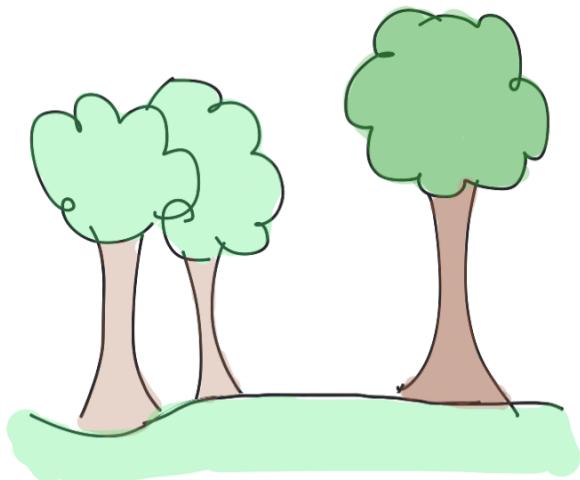
A Life in the Woods: *a children's tale*



Once upon a time, in a land far, far away (far away referring to approximately 0.6 miles up Science Hill) there lived a very tall, very beautiful *Prunus serotina*.

She stood at a regal 10.40 meters tall, and all the trees in the land admired her reddish-brown, slightly plated bark and her long, slender branches.

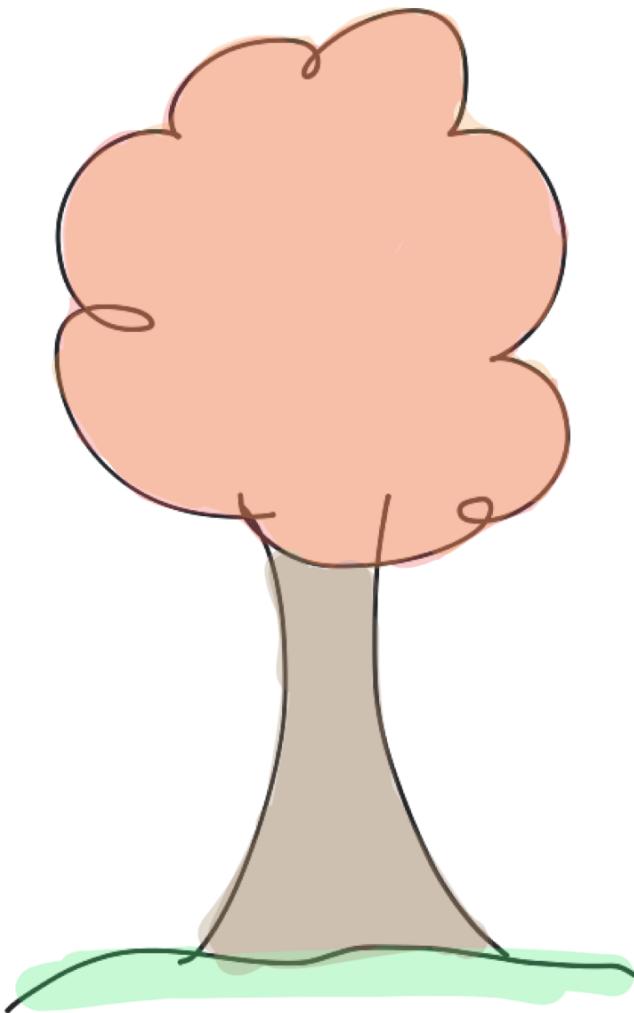
“You have such lovely wood!” the other trees would exclaim, setting her branches all a-flutter in gratitude.
“I’m sure humans find it all the rage for use in hardwood floors and other wooden furnitures!”



Prunus serotina loved her life by the little blue house on Mansfield Street, surrounded by her tree friends and visited by birds and squirrels—though they never nibbled on her bark, leaves, or twigs because they were a bit toxic, thanks to cyanogenic compounds.

Still, she was having a nice time. So nice, in fact, that she almost didn't notice the season beginning to change. But one day, she noticed that her friend, Red Maple from down the street, was looking a bit sickly.





“Why are your leaves all orange?”
Prunus serotina cried out in worry.

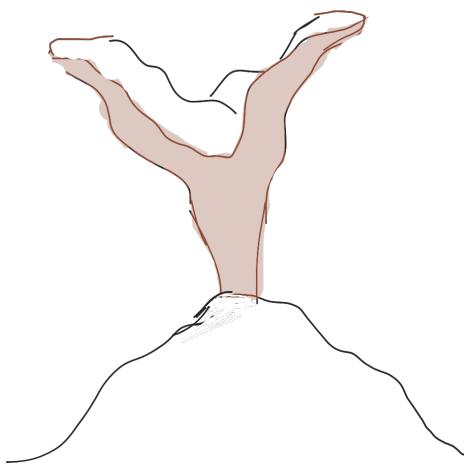
Red Maple shuddered, shedding a few of his now bright-red leaves in the process.

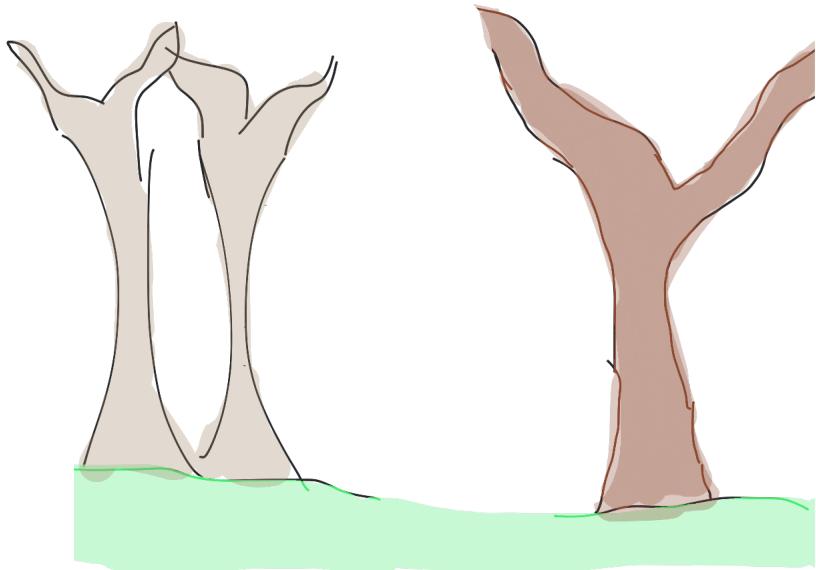


“It happens to all of us, friend. Why, just look! It’s happening to you!” And *Prunus serotina* looked at her leaves and saw that they too, were turning orange.

The whole thing made her very nervous indeed, particularly when her leaves began falling and the birds and squirrels didn't visit her as often.

She grew very sleepy as snowflakes descended from the sky, and she decided to take a nice, long nap...





Which saw her awakening in warm,
lovely weather! She looked around at
her tree friends, who seemed to be
waking up too.



“Hello!” they called out to her. “Did you have a good winter?”

“I guess I did,” she answered. “But where are all my leaves?”

They assured her that her leaves would come back. As her bird and squirrel and insect friends came by again, she waited.

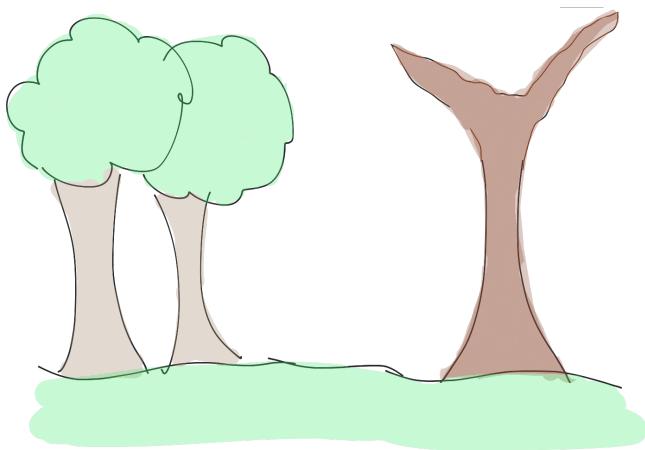


And waited...

And waited...

The trees around her all got their leaves back, but as they began to flower and bloom, *Prunus serotina* had only small terminal end buds.

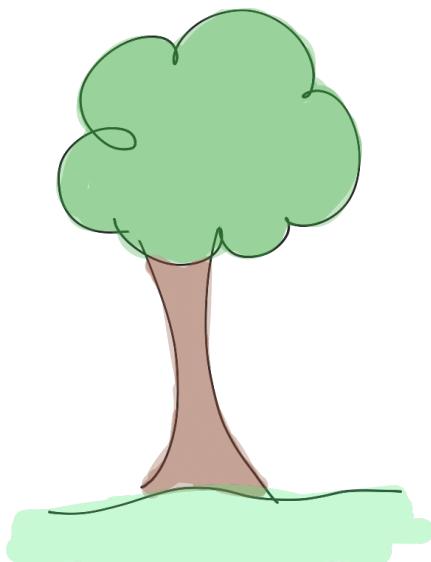
Worried, she asked Red Maple about it. He told her not to fret.



“Some of us are late bloomers!”

When the first of her leaves began to emerge, she was relieved and spent much of her time admiring their ovate shape and pinnate venation. They were just as emerald green as she remembered.

When she was full of leaves, she said to Red Maple, “You were right! They’re back!”





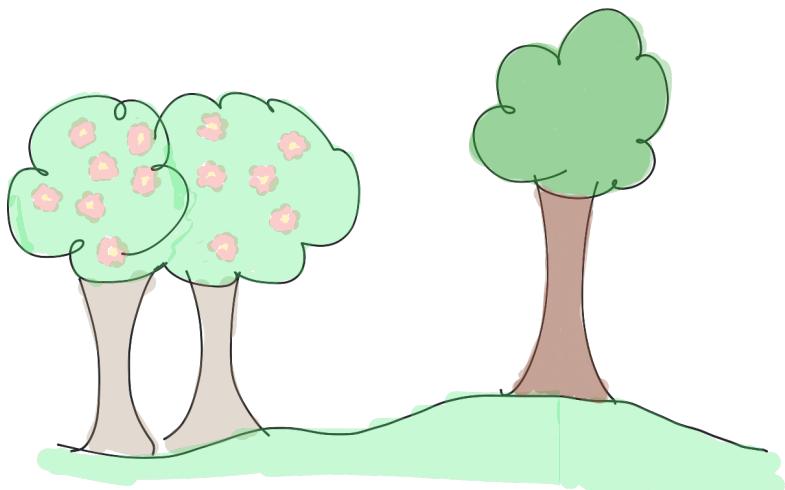
“Very good,” Red Maple said. “Soon you’ll have your flowers too.”

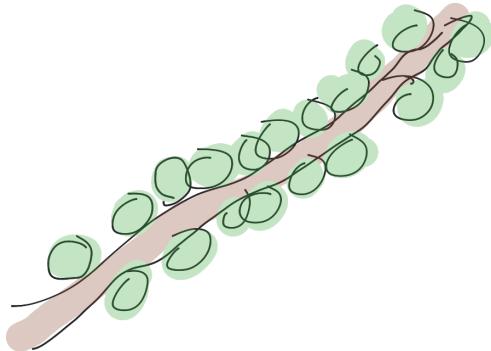
“Flowers?” she asked. And when she looked around, all the trees around her had beautiful flowers, and they smelled lovely, and bees were visiting them. She felt very sad then. Why were her flowers late?

April continued into May, and the other trees basked in their lovely springtime blooms. *Prunus serotina* began to fear that she would not get any flowers at all!

Red Maple laughed and told her, “Just wait.”

So she pouted and did so.





To her surprise, she started to notice dense clusters of round, alternately-arranged buds at the ends of her branches, in racemes of about four to six inches.

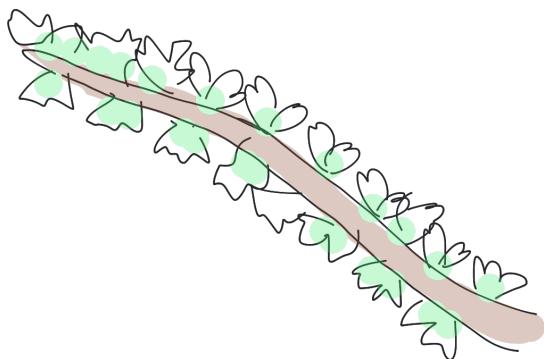
She asked Red Maple, “Are these my flowers? They’re very small, and they don’t smell nice.”

And Red Maple shook his big green leaves and told her, “Just wait.”

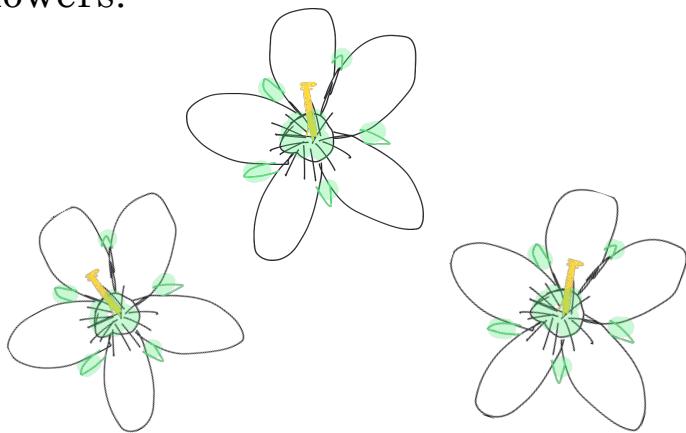
So she pouted and did so.

Late spring arrived, and with it, all the other flowers were being pollinated. *Prunus serotina* was growing very impatient, but she had promised Red Maple she would wait.

She ignored the other trees' questions—"Where are your flowers?"—and continued chatting with her bird and squirrel friends.

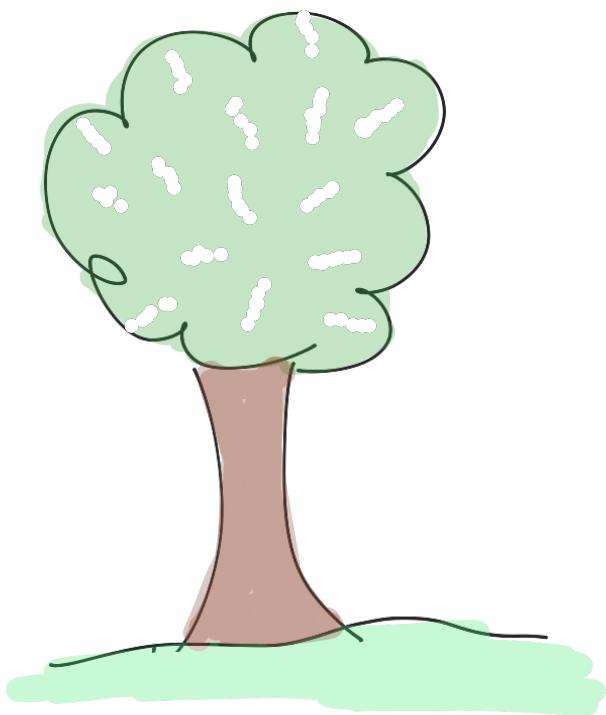


Then one day the sun rose, and *Prunus serotina* was stunned to find all her little round buds had bloomed into dense clusters of small white flowers!



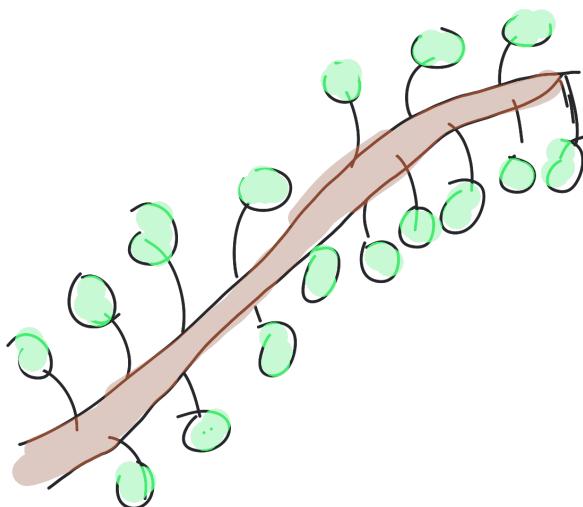
Her tree friends complimented her on the beauty of her flowers: the five obovate-shaped petals, five green sepals, fifteen to twenty-two stamens, and a central pistil with a flattened stigma on each individual flower.

“Such delicacy!” they cried. “What beautiful blooms! It was well worth the wait.”



Prunus serotina fluttered her green leaves and white flower clusters and told Red Maple, “You were right. It was well worth the wait.”

Red Maple only said mysteriously,
“Just wait.”



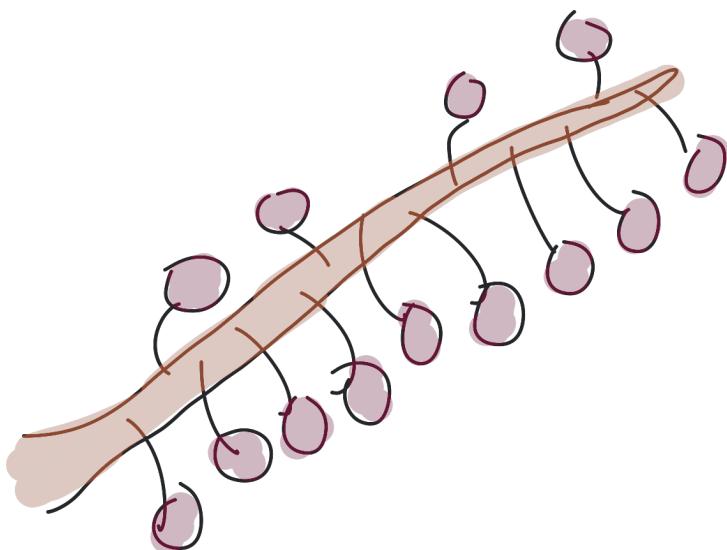
Prunus serotina's flowers bloomed for a good 2-3 weeks, and while they bloomed, many little insects came by and pollinated the flowers.

She was a bit surprised when her flowers began to wilt and fall, and in their place came small, round, fleshy, green drupes.

Worried, she asked Red Maple if she was sick, but he did not answer.

Summer passed, and the drupes darkened into red, then darker red, until suddenly, they were a rich purple-black and emanated a sweet smell. All of *Prunus serotina*'s bird and squirrel friends came by and ate the fruit, thanking her for the delicious cherries.

“Even humans would like your fruit!”
the birds twittered. The squirrels
chattered in agreement. “They could
use it to make rum and jellies!”



Prunus serotina was very grateful for
the compliments, especially when the
squirrels and birds wandered off to
disperse her seeds.

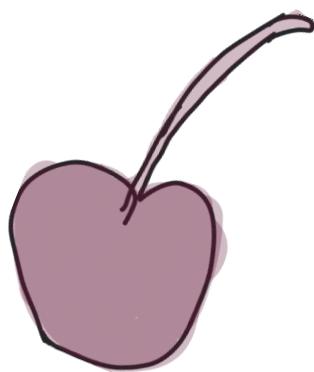
Soon all her fruit was gone and her leaves were turning yellow and orange again.

Instead of the fear she had felt last fall, she felt accomplished and happy. She settled back, ready to rest for the winter.

Red Maple, his red leaves falling from his branches, asked, “Already excited for spring?”



And *Prunus serotina*, thinking of her
pretty late blooms and lovely fruit,
shook her browning leaves and said,
“Just wait!”



A Botanical Bildungsroman

There was, a three-fifths mile up Science Hill,
a wild cherry tree who, in cruelest April,

 felt she would never be the same again:
 as the weather warmed and the days lengthened,

 her slender branch tips began to tingle,
 with pale-white flower clusters to dangle.

In the summer she sensed another change:
 her thin, lace-like blossoms would rearrange

 into fruit. (Her dark cherries bittersweet,
 when ripe, are good and safe for you to eat

 as jam on bread or garnish in your drink;
 avoid her toxic twigs—their almond-stink.)

In Mid-October, a chill struck the air:
her green leaves turned a yellow just as fair.

She mourned for her golden leaves as they fell,
and asked herself, “Will ever I be well?”

We, New Haven’s lovers of botany,
assured our beloved local cherry:

“*Prunus serotina*, be not afraid:
next year promises more coming-of-age.”