

## Flathead Cherries

Montana ranks sixth in the nation (after Washington, California, Oregon, Michigan, and Idaho) for sweet cherry production, but you'd think the state was number one the way Montanans boast about Flathead cherries.

"Flathead" refers to the area where they grow, mostly on the eastern side of Flathead Lake, which provides the mild climate they need during the winter. Cherry trees were first planted here in 1866. The most common varieties are Lapin and Lambert, and perhaps it is the tastiness of these varieties as well as the soil and climate that makes Flathead cherries so popular.

Cherry trees are usually in full bloom in late May, with cherries ripening in late July. During the two- or three-week growing season, roadside stands open up along the shoreline of the lake on Highway 35. During this short period, most cherries you see at Montana farmers markets and grocery stores are Flathead cherries.

One Montana producer is The Orchard at Flathead Lake, owned by a second-generation family. They make many things from their organic cherries, such as chutney, jam, barbecue sauce, and syrup, as well as apple and pear butters and apricot preserves. If you find their dried cherries, buy as many as you can afford. The Orchard does not have a roadside stand, but you can buy their products at many shops throughout Montana, or order them online at [montanaorchard.com](http://montanaorchard.com). You can also arrange with them to have fresh cherries delivered during late July and early August. Check their website for details: [montanaorchard.com](http://montanaorchard.com).

Try to time your visit to the area during a cherry festival (see page 109). To find more information about special events and Montana cherries, along with recipes and photos of orchards and farming families, go online to the Flathead Lake Cherry Growers website at [montanacherries.com](http://montanacherries.com). The organization's slogan incorporates one of Montana's nicknames: "The Last Best Place brings you the Last Best Cherry."