



The 'FE'* Pie Cherry Story

(*Patent Pending)

By Bernis Ingvaldson with Les McCartney, March 2025

Cherry pie has been in the McCartney family's culinary history for more than 60 years. Momma McCartney's pies were the best, and brothers Fred and Les liked to make mini-pies with their pie irons when camping, using their mother's jam as the filling.

The tree that Frances McCartney purchased in the 1960's was a grafted North Star, planted at their home in Great Falls in fairly heavy clay soil. She was very careful to make sure the graft was well above the ground. The original tree lived for ten to fifteen years, with the rootstock sending out a few suckers each year and more after the grafted portion died. Two of the suckers next to the tree were kept to replace the original, even though they did not know what kind of cherry they would get.

The new cherry trees, which started producing in the 1970's, resembled the mother tree as far as leaf and bark, and color of the berry's skin, but the new, slightly smaller cherry's flesh was darker and they liked the flavor even better. As the kids got older, they never gave the tree much thought. Les just wondered why more people were not growing pie cherries!

Fast forwarding to 1990. Les took a job managing a campground where the owner wanted to transform the Montana windswept prairie into a lush oasis. For seven years Les researched and planted hundreds of trees and bushes, ending up with 13 miles of drip line. Les says, "The result is that I have a love for trees, especially if I can eat the fruit!"

In the mid 1990's, Les transplanted some of the newer suckers to Bozeman at his older sister Kathleen's place. Several years later, Les moved to Bozeman and set up a trailer on the wind swept prairie. One of his first thoughts was "Trees, must have trees!" Shelter belts, various berry bushes, and multiple fruit trees went into the ground, including several more suckers from the Great Falls tree. In consultation with a friend, who happened to be his local apple tree supplier and grafting mentor, Les stayed away from some of the older pie cherries such as Montmorency, North Star, Mesabi, and Meteor, as they were known to be marginal in Bozeman. Bozeman is about 1500 feet higher in elevation than Great Falls and has a shorter growing season. Meanwhile, the family cherry trees transplanted from Great Falls produced reliably year after year.

For comparison, Les also planted several sweet/tart crosses and zone 2 cold hardy tart hybrids including some of the Romance Series cherries from the University of Saskatchewan. Les chuckles as he recalls that “The results are unscientific, but my wife simply said, ‘Why are you even messing with these other varieties, ours is a much better flavor!’”

In 2014, the tree friend came to Les with his stamp of approval. “First of all, I lost or had severe die back on every pie cherry I was growing except for the Evans Bali and they lost all their flower buds in the February warm-up. Your tree produced a full crop. Second, your cherry is the King of Cherries when it comes to flavor. We should propagate it.”

It took no more to convince Les that they had a cherry distinct enough to offer to others at a commercial level. “For forty years we knew we had a great cherry. Now we knew we had a unique and great cherry.” With this new impetus, Les began the long, arduous journey to patent the plant and find a larger scale propagator and distributors. In addition, with so many memories tied up in this journey, the McCartney family knew their cherry deserved a special name. They are now happy to announce the release for sales of the patent pending ‘**FE**’ pie cherry, in honor of their beloved mother, ‘**Frances Elizabeth**’.

As Les has been observing this cherry for most of his life, he is happy to share the information he has gleaned over the years.

What it is not:

- Not a *Prunus avium* (wild sweet cherry). Different leaf and *avium* has died back three years in a row.
- Not Evans Bali that has reddish bark. It starts out reddish, but not as red as Evans, and the tree and berry is smaller. However, genetic testing has shown it’s closest relative tested so far is the Evans Bali.
- Not a bush form, definitely a tree form.

What it is:

- *Prunus cerasus* (common name: pie cherry)
- Hardy to at least -45F, USDA zone 3a or lower
- Grows 8-12 feet tall, 8'+ wide at Bozeman, MT
- Fruit size 4-5g
- Brix 17-21
- Grows well in heavy or light soils
- Flesh of the fresh fruit is a yellowish pink and darkens more when frozen or processed
- Juice and skin are bright red
- Pit is medium sized and slightly oval
- Excellent sweet flavor balanced with tartness

Additional information:

- Great for fresh eating and processing, excellent for wine
- Dries into delicious “raisins”
- Blossoms three to four days later than Evans and a week later than the Romance series from Canada. Goes dormant three or more days earlier.
- Ripens late July to early August in Bozeman, a couple of weeks after Carmine Jewel and around the same time as Evans.
- Even ripening, usually pick all at once (just a few will be overripe or underripe)
- Suckers readily, easily controlled by mowing
- Recommended to keep the trees pruned to ten feet and under for ease of bird netting

The ‘**FE**’ (patent pending) pie cherry is now available for purchase online from www.HoneyberryUSA.com, tel 218-331-8070.

Note from distributor: Les has purchased various berry bushes from **HoneyberryUSA** over the years, and they are now thrilled to partner with the McCartney family in promoting the '**FE**' (patent pending) pie cherry. Another of the McCartney sisters, Colleen, living closer to them in Moorhead, MN, was the first to give them a taste of their family treasure in frozen form. They can verify it is indeed a very delicious tart cherry, with a unique sweet flavor profile, sure to please bakers and consumers alike!

Headquartered in Bagley, MN, **HoneyberryUSA** is a licensed grower and distributor of many varieties of zone 3 cold hardy specialty fruits such as honeyberries, tart cherries, saskatoons (service berries), currants, kiwi, seaberries, and more. In addition to their mail-order nursery, they welcome the public to their U-Pick Farm. For more information, please visit <https://www.honeyberryusa.com> or call Jim or Bernis Ingvaldson at (218) 331-8070.

About the McCartney orchard which goes under the name **Elfin Works**:

Located in Four Corners on the family farm that their grand father purchased 99 years ago. **Elfin Works Orchard** grows small berries including gooseberries, aronia, honeyberries, apples, pears and cherries. Many of the fruits will be available for purchase this summer. Les still works full time so it is best to contact him at lessherimccartney@gmail.com for availability.

'FE' (patent pending) Pie Cherry produces prolifically along its sprawling branches.

Later to wake up in the spring, and earlier to go dormant in the fall than other tart cherries (see red-leafed plants at bottom right), this plant is well suited to withstand harsh climates.

