February is Cherry Month!

Anna Schremmer
Phillips-Rooks District Extension Agent
Family and Consumer Science

Mom had a big orchard. Lots of apricot, apple, peach, and cherry trees. My favorite were the cherry trees. With the unpredictable springs, yo-yo weather and hot Kansas summers, the cherry trees often did not produce. However, when we did have cherries, we picked, canned or froze every last cherry. Since I was the youngest, my job was to climb the middle of the tree, being careful not to break any of the branches to get all the cherries.

If you want to grow cherries well, you should live in Michigan. 75% of the tart cherries produced in the United States are grown in Michigan. 70% of all the cherries, both sweet and tart, produced in the U.S. come from four states - Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Utah. Did you notice none of those states have our hot Kansas summers or yo-yo weather?

Did you know February is Cherry Month! It also celebrates National Cherry Blossom Festival, which commemorates the 3000 cherry trees from the people of Japan to the people of the United States. Presidents Day in February reminds us of the debated story of George Washington chopping down a cherry tree. Whether or not George Washington really cut down a cherry tree as a child still gives us a lesson to teach the moral value of honesty demonstrated by our first President. Since the early reading books by McGuffy made the story common legend, cherries have been associated with George Washington. With Presidents’ Day, Valentine’s Day, and the gloom of winter, February is a perfect month for Cherry Pie. February 20 is even denoted as National Cherry Pie Day.

An interesting fact: At one time it was illegal to serve ice cream on cherry pie in Kansas!

Even though February 20 is past, bake a cherry pie for your family tonight. Here is a Cherry Pie recipe to celebrate Cherry Month.

**CHERRY PIE**
4 cups fresh or frozen tart cherries
1 – 1 ½ cups granulated sugar
4 tablespoons cornstarch or Clear Jel
¼ teaspoon almond extract (optional)

**Hint:** you can use canned Cherry Pie Filling too.

**Directions:**
Place cherries in medium saucepan and place over heat. Cover. After the cherries lose considerable juice, which may take a few minutes remove from heat. In a small bowl, mix the sugar and cornstarch or Clear Jel together. Pour this mixture into the hot cherries and mix well. Add almond extract if desired, and mix. Return the mixture to the stove and cook over low heat until thickened, stirring frequently. Remove from the heat and let cool. If the filling is too thick, add a little water; to thin, add more cornstarch.

**Crust**
2 ½ cups all-purpose flour
¾ teaspoon salt
½ cup cold butter
½ cup shortening
¼ cup cold water
3 Tablespoons sour cream
1 egg
Cut together the flour, salt, butter, and shortening until pea-sized chunks. Whisk the wet ingredients together and drizzle over the dry mixture. Toss with a fork until lightly mixed. Divide into 2 discs and chill for at least 30 minutes. When ready to use, roll out to desired size. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Roll out each disc large enough to fit into an 8 – 9-inch pan. Bottom crust should be larger than top crust. Pour cooled cherry mixture into the crust. Moisten edge of bottom crust. Place top crust on and flute the edge of the pie. Make a slit in the middle of the crust for steam to escape. Sprinkle with sugar if desired. Bake for about 50 minutes or until bubbling in the center of pie. Remove from oven and place on a rack to cool.

**Hint:** Cover edge of pie with strips of aluminum foil to prevent edge from browning to much before pie is done.

**Hint:** Use premade and pre-rolled pie crust from the grocery store in place of the homemade crust.

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