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## Sucker born every minute

Peninsula Permaculture · September 23, 2021



By Alex Féthière



Osoberry (*Oemlaria cerasiformis*) has filled the gap left by evergreen huckleberry. (*Alex Féthière*)

An obsession with air drainage led me to inadvertently create soil drainage.

A hillside was covered with evergreen huckleberry, and the shrubs had been struggling beneath a bigleaf maple canopy for years. Fallen huckleberry leaves had piled up beneath dead undergrowth and grown moldy.

I wanted to take advantage of the hillside's excellent drainage and thought little about sun exposure. Reasoning that moldy mats were an unhealthy circumstance for any kind of fruit tree I might plant, I thinned the evergreen huckleberry by 25%. I think my worst rookie mistake was pulling out the roots.

First, I planted American persimmons, seaberries, chestnuts and stone pines. Most of these succumbed during dry summers, and the lack of light didn't help. As they died, the hillside was washed away by erosion that piled topsoil at the base of the driveway.

The remaining trees on the hillside included bitter cherry (*Prunus emarginata*). I had left these intact because I was partial to their flowers and wildlife value.

I also planned to use them as grafting stock someday. In theory, most members of the *Prunus* genus (including cherries, plums, apricots, nectarines, peaches and even almonds) can be grafted on any *Prunus* rootstock.

You might have seen such "fruit salad" trees at nurseries. Someone in Puyallup claims to have successfully grafted four varieties of cherry onto bitter cherry seedlings with whip-and-tongue grafts wrapped in parafilm.

I had only successfully grafted weeping elm onto American elm rootstocks before. I thought that if greengage plum scions would take to bitter cherry, I could circumvent the gage's fickleness in South Sound's climate.

Perhaps the scions were too dry, or the season too advanced, or my choice of electrical tape unsound - or all three. None of the scions took and I stopped thinking about the bitter cherries for a while.

While planting paw paws, groundnuts, black locust and bamboo to stanch the hill's runneling voids, I noticed a wall of basal sprouts had cut through the channel. It seemed they had been forming a net to catch the runoff, which surprised me because the closest individual tree was 20 feet away.

I've seen root suckers spring up at such distances from the parent stump when a bitter cherry is cut down, but not when the tree is unharmed. Excited by this behavior, I checked the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Forest Service and found that bitter cherries are used for erosion control and land reclamation.

Upon looking closer, I found the root sprouts were not only more than root sprouts, they were not even bitter cherry. They were osoberries that were layering as well as root sprouting because they had been displaced by erosion.

Osoberry (*Oemlaria cerasiformis*), aka Indian plum, grows on the same hillside. I know them because wildlife enjoy them and they are the first deciduous shrub to flower at the end of winter. Their cheerful chains of drooping white bells ring in spring's approach.

As erosion undermined these osoberries' roots, they fell and rooted from the branches, also sending out root sprouts to explore the destabilized ground. The living mesh they formed trapped leaves, twigs and silt, effectively creating a terrace just as I have done for any tree that has succeeded on that hill.

Permaculture places a lot of stock in observation. Though I had acted too rashly in removing so many evergreen huckleberries without allowing time to see the effects, I was glad that I had left these other trees to track their manners and roles. They are working faster to save the hillside than the towering maples and Douglas fir that anchor it.

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Originally published in the Shelton-Mason County Journal, September 23, 2021: <https://www.masoncounty.com/story/2021/09/23/news/sucker-born-every-minute/184.html>

Text from masoncounty.com, retrieved October 7, 2026.