



UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Crabapples Are a Fall Delight

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

While the farm stands and shops are filled with mums, cornstalks and pumpkins for fall decorating, fruiting crabapples are another great plant to dress up the autumn landscape. These small trees, rarely topping 25 feet, can produce an abundance of gold or red hued fruits adding a jeweled tone to the home grounds.

Crabapples are tough, durable trees that belong to the rose family, just like their close relative, the apple. Both are members of the *Malus* genus. So what makes a crabapple different from an apple? Mainly, it is their size. Plants that produce fruit 2 inches in diameter or more are considered apples and those with smaller fruits are recognized as crabapples.

While all apples are believed to have originated in the mountains of Kazakhstan, there are species that are native to Europe, Asia and North America. Most of the apples and crabapples we are familiar with started as cuttings and seeds brought to the New World by the early colonists. Their primary desire was for an apple to make good cider with so a lot of random hybridization occurred creating new cultivars of apples and crabapples. Tasty cider, as it turns out, comes from a mixture of sweet apples and tart, sour crabapples.

All crabapples are technically edible but many are downright bitter. In the past, these fruit were referred to as 'spitters' and for a good reason! If you are thinking about an eating crabapple, look for 'Whitney' with its red, golf ball sized fruits or 'Chestnut' which is a University of Minnesota selection with pale yellow fruit streaked with red. Both have pink budded, white spring blossoms, reach about 12 to 15 feet in height and width, and are self-pollinating and hardy in New England. 'Dolgo' is a larger crabapple tree growing about 20 feet high and 30 feet wide and is noted for its fragrant white flowers, juicy crimson fruit, fetching yellow fall foliage and disease resistant. It is a bit tart for fresh eating but is great for jams and as a wildlife food source.



Red fruiting crabapple varieties are plentiful and some to consider are 'Adirondack' with its orange-red fruits that hang on through the winter, the Sargent crab that only grows about 8 feet tall, and 'Prairie Fire' sporting noticeable purple-red fall fruits and coral-red spring flowers. All three are hardy and have good disease resistance. The eighteen-foot-high 'Adirondack' has an upright form with no pruning required.

Crabapple image by Dawn Pettinelli

Yellow fruiting varieties are a bit more challenging to find but include ‘Harvest Gold’ covered with white flowers in spring and yellow fruits in the fall, ‘Golden Raindrops’ reaching up to 20 feet in height with abundant, golden colored fall fruit, and 12-foot-tall ‘Sparkling Sprite’. All have good disease resistance but ‘Golden Raindrops’ may be susceptible to fire blight.

Four diseases threaten both apple trees and crabapples trees. Apple scab is a fungus that causes black spots on leaves or corky spots on the fruit. Fire blight is a bacterial disease that makes affected branches and leaves appear as torched, hence the name. Cedar apple rust causes rust colored spots on the leaves and needs two hosts—apple species and Eastern red cedar. Powdery mildew is a white fungus but probably of lesser concern than the other three diseases. While it is expected that some spraying of apple trees would be necessary for disease control, typically crabapples are left on their own, so when the opportunity arises, always select disease resistant varieties. If trees are infected and leaf drop occurs, rake up fallen leaves and dispose of them off your property.

For the most part, crabapples are tough, dependable trees that are adaptable to a variety of site conditions. Plant them in full sun in a well-drained soil. They prefer a soil pH of between 6.0 and 7.0. Fertilize them once a year in the spring with a balanced garden fertilizer unless a soil test recommends otherwise. Once established, watering is only necessary during prolonged drought periods.

Depending on the cultivar or species chosen, pruning ranges from practically never to every year. It will not be as daunting to prune a crabapple tree, as it is an apple. Do any pruning in early June as next year’s flower and fruit buds are forming by late June into mid-July. Remove any water sprouts, which are fast growing shoots springing up from the branches, and suckers, which are quick growing shoots arising from the base of the tree. Also, cut out dead, diseased, crossing or rubbing branches. As with all fruit trees, remove any branches growing towards the middle of the tree to keep the center open to sunlight and air.

Why choose to grow a crabapple? The fruiting varieties can be quite decorative this time of year. Fruits are dependable and serve as an excellent wildlife (and sometimes human) food source attracting birds and other creatures. Butterflies also feed on the crabapples as they fall to the ground and soften.

The early blooms are attractive and vital to both honeybees and native pollinators. All are looking for early spring sources of pollen and nectar.

Sizes range from 6 to 25 feet in height so a cultivar can be found for almost any spot in the yard. Columnar varieties are available for those narrow spaces and weeping crabapples can be artistically placed in the landscape as focal points. Check out which crabapples your local nursery has and see if you can find one for your yard.

For questions about growing or choosing crabapples or for other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.