

Master Gardener Corner: Ornamental Crabapples

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One of the most popular flowering and fragrant spring trees is the crabapple. Crabapples belong to the rose family, Rosaceae, and they are in the same genus (*Malus*) as apples. Crabapples include about 25 species of deciduous trees or shrubs which are native to the temperate regions of North America, Europe and Asia. Three species of crabapple native to the eastern United States include: Narrowleaf Crabapple (*Malus angustifolia*), Prairie Crabapple (*Malus ioensis*) and Sweet Crabapple (*Malus coronaria*) whose name probably refers to the fragrance of the flowers, rather than the taste of the fruit which is sour. Other crabapple species native to Europe and Asia were brought here by early colonists as seeds or cuttings.



Crabapples are defined by their fruit size. If the fruit of a *Malus* tree is two inches or larger in diameter then it is considered an apple. But if the fruit is smaller than two inches, it is considered a crabapple. All crabapple fruits are technically edible although most are bitter tasting. Crabapples are naturally very high in pectin. Crabapples can be used to make cider, jelly, apple butter, chutneys and apple sauce.



Crabapple tree in the CCE Genesee Garden. Photo Credit: CCE Genesee County

Crabapple trees are tough and adaptable, doing well under many different conditions. They can be grown on medium to heavy soils that are somewhat poorly to well drained. Tolerant of a range of soil pH from 5.0 to 7.5, they prefer slightly acidic soil (pH 6.2 to 6.8). Crabapples should be planted in full sun for best flower and fruit production. Most crabapples are hardy in Zones 4 to 7.

Ornamental crabapples are valued mainly for their flowers and sometimes the fruit. Flowers range in color from white to pink to red. Blooms come out before or with the leaves in the spring. Fruit may be shades of red, yellow or green. Some crabapples bloom heavily every other year. Fall leaf color depends on the cultivar but most are not known for a colorful display. The height and width of the crown or canopy ranges from 10 to 25 feet. Crabapples grow 8 to 10 inches per year, depending on the species.

Crabapples have been used as landscape plants for many years. There is nothing more spectacular than a grouping of crabapples in full bloom. Planted by itself, a crabapple will make a nice specimen tree or focal point in the landscape. Crabapples range in height from five to forty feet. Look for shorter varieties when planting on a street near utility lines. In a small yard they can be a good shade tree. Crabapples can also be used for creating a privacy screen. However, falling fruit may be a nuisance if the tree is planted near a patio or sidewalk. In that case, look for a fruitless cultivar such as 'Spring Snow.'

Crabapples provide four seasons of interest when used in the landscape. In addition to their stunning spring displays they are also a nice foliage plant during the summer. Some cultivars even have purplish-red leaves. Their colorful fruit provides a nice fall display and some varieties keep their fruit into the winter which can

attract birds to your garden. Crabapples come in a range of sizes and forms. Most have a rounded shape but some are more upright or narrow and there are a few with a weeping form. Many crabapples have attractive bark or interesting branching which makes good winter interest. Older trees may develop gnarled and twisted limbs creating interesting specimens or silhouettes in the garden.

Crabapples are not maintenance free. If you plant one you will need to properly maintain it to reap the benefits of adding it to your garden. Annual pruning is necessary to maintain the shape and to open the center of the tree to light and air. Pruning is generally done when the tree is dormant. Prune out dead wood, crossing branches and suckers. Rabbits and mice may damage the trunk and deer may prune the branches for you. Crabapples are susceptible to the same serious diseases as apples. Apple scab, fire blight, powdery mildew and cedar apple rust are the four major diseases affecting crabapples. These will need to be controlled on susceptible varieties. Your best defense against diseases is to choose a disease resistant variety. Potential insect problems include Japanese beetle, fall webworm, inchworm, apple maggot, aphids and scale.

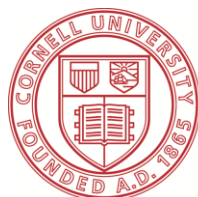


Crabapple "Prairifire"
Source: Missouri Botanical Gardens

There are over 800 ornamental varieties of crabapples to choose from. Here are a couple of varieties that are reported to have good disease resistance. Crabapple 'Prairifire' grows 15 to 20 feet tall. It is one of the best red leaved crabapples with pinkish-red blooms and glossy red fruit. 'Robinson' is a pink-flowered crabapple that grows 15 to 25 feet tall. It has a rounded shape, deep pink flowers and red fruit. Sargent crabapple (*Malus sargentii*) typically grows 6 to 8 feet tall with a 15 feet spread. Pink buds open to fragrant white flowers, followed by small, red crabapples. 'Pink Princess' grows to about 8 feet tall. Purplish buds open to rose-pink flowers, followed by small, deep red crabapples that birds love.

Crabapples are versatile ornamental trees. It is no surprise that these trees are so popular with their spring flower power, colorful fall fruit and tree forms to suit a variety of landscapes.

Resources: University of Missouri Extension, Kansas State University, Clemson University Cooperative Extension, Missouri Botanic Garden and University of Maine.



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