

Crabapples – Then and Now

When I was eight or nine years old, I loved to climb the tree in my neighbor's backyard. It had dark pink flowers, but more importantly loads of dark red fruit. Branching low to the ground it was easy to climb and hide. From my perch I could spot my classmate Kelly when she came into her backyard. I would pelt her with fruit when she came near. I was in love, with Kelly and with the tree.



The tree was a crabapple. Any apple tree (*Malus* species) with fruit smaller than 2 inches is considered a crabapple. The fruit of crabapples are edible but are usually quite sour. Crabapples come in many shapes and sizes and should be planted in full sun for best flower and fruit production. The textbooks say they need a well-drained, moist and acid soil but judging by the sheer numbers seen everywhere they're evidently not too fussy. Maybe they haven't read the books.

My affection for these plants has led to many an uphill battle while trying to convince customers that a crabapple is the perfect tree for their landscape. If you are worried about messy fruit, choose a variety like 'Donald Wyman'. Red to pink flower buds open to large white flowers. They are followed by bright red, glossy, persistent fruit that remain on the tree into winter. This excellent, rounded crabapple reaches a height of 20 feet and spreads 20 to 25 feet.

'Spring Snow' is a more upright variety reaching 25 to 30 feet in height but spreading only 15. It also has white flowers that are followed by... nothing. This variety has no fruit. Other varieties with persistent fruit include: 'Bob White', 'Indian Summer', 'Prairiefire', 'Profusion'.

If you don't want a white-flowering tree, you might like the dark red flowers of 'Prairiefire'. This 15 to 20 foot upright spreading crab also features one half-inch persistent maroon fruit.

Red flowers are also a feature of 'Cardinal' crab, but it produces few fruit. Its habit is somewhat vase-shaped and at maturity reaches 15 to 20 feet. 'Cardinal' also features another variation among crabapples, leaf color. Glossy red foliage covers the tree all season long.

'Thunderchild' also has colored foliage. It's deep purple leaves are a perfect backdrop for the delicate pink, single flowers. The fruit that follows is half-inch and dark red or purple. 'Thunderchild' has an upright habit reaching 15 to 20 feet with a spread of 15 feet.

Other varieties with red or pink flowers: 'Profusion' -- red, 'Indian Summer' -- red, 'Strawberry Parfait' -- pink with red margin. Other varieties with red to purplish foliage: Adams, Donald Wyman, Robinson.

There are weeping varieties of crabapples. 'Louisa' has red buds that open to single pink flowers. A prolific bloomer, 'Louisa' has a graceful weeping habit and reaches a mature height of 15 feet tall and wide. 'Red Jade' is another weeping variety with deep pink buds that open to white flowers.

There are also several grafted crabapples. The grafting process involves taking a crabapple variety, usually a low growing shrubby type and attaching or grafting it onto a tall straight trunk of another variety. A "shrub on a stick". 'Coralburst' is one example. It has coral pink buds that open to double rose pink flowers. Few fruit are produced. It reaches 10 to 15 foot tall.

A rather unique example is 'Lollipop' Crabapple. As the name indicates it's a very rounded 10' x 10' crabapple that has single white flowers.

One of the most well-known grafted cultivars is 'Tina'. 'Tina' reaches only 6 to 8 feet but spreads 8 to 10 feet wide. The pink to red buds open to white flowers and the fruit are red and quite tiny.

Many of the older and some newer varieties are susceptible to one of several diseases of crabapples. Every year they bloom beautifully and then by June or July the leaves start to turn yellow and drop until they are almost all gone. In our area the most common problems are cedar apple rust and apple scab. Fireblight is less commonly seen.

Cedar apple rust starts out as small yellow to orange spots that enlarge and cause severe leaf drop. Sprays are available to control it but must be repeated numerous times. Apple scab causes darkened spots on the leaves but generally does not cause much leaf drop. Fortunately there are several varieties that are resistant. Many of the varieties already mentioned are resistant or nearly so: 'Adams', 'Cardinal', 'Donald Wyman', 'Indian Summer', 'Prairiefire', 'Profusion', and 'Thunderchild'.

Kelly moved away (I don't think it had to do with my pelting) but after nearly 50 years the crabapple is still standing. Also standing is my feeling that in the Chicago area there is no other flowering tree that comes close to the variety and beauty of flowering crabapples.

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