

Name That Tree

By Gretchen Spencer, Fairfax Master Gardener

If you chose Crabapple, you are correct. Crabapples are members of the Rosaceae family and belong to the same genus, *Malus*, as apples. It is believed that all apple trees had their origins in the mountains of Kazakhstan. While it is not certain how they arrived here, there are a few species of crabapples that are native to North America. Most of our crabapple species were brought here by the colonists as seeds or cuttings. And as their name implies, the fruit of most crabapples, while edible, is bitter tasting. The difference between apple trees and crabapple trees resides in the size of their fruit. If the fruit of a *Malus* tree is greater than 2 inches in diameter, it is considered an apple. If the fruit is 2 inches or less in diameter, it is considered a crabapple.



photo: Missouri Botanical Garden

Malus sargentii



photo: Purdue Arboretum

Crabapple blossoms

Growing up in Wisconsin, crabapple trees were the common spring-blooming tree and a delight to see after a typical long Wisconsin winter. So I was not surprised to learn that these cold hardy trees are the dominant spring flowering trees in the northern states. In fact, Michael Dirr in his *Encyclopedia of Trees and Shrubs*, writes that crabapples are “not perfectly suited to warmer climates.” However, there are now hundreds of cultivars available for the landscape, many of which have good to excellent disease resistance: the main criteria for selecting a crabapple tree.

Crabapple trees are susceptible to four diseases. They include the bacterial disease, fireblight, and three fungal diseases: scab, rust and powdery mildew. While there are

cultural practices and chemical sprays available for mitigating these diseases, the best practice is to plant trees that are disease resistant. Crabapple trees may also be bothered by Japanese beetles feeding on the leaves. Some varieties are less prone to Japanese beetles. There are several Internet sources that identify disease and insect resistant cultivars and they are listed below. Alternatively, your local nursery can also provide disease and insect resistant information on the cultivars they carry. Be sure to select trees that thrive in our Mid-Atlantic climate.

In general, crabapple trees grow best in full sun for optimal flowers and fruit displays. They prefer average to dry well-drained, acid soils. They prefer a pH of 6.2 to 6.8 though they will tolerate a pH range from 5.0 to 7.5. Once established, these trees are considered low maintenance, relatively tough plants. They may need occasional pruning to remove crossing branches or water sprouts. And, as they are propagated by

grafting, they need to have their suckers removed.

Now comes the fun part, selecting a tree! Among the disease resistant varieties of crabapples, there are a host of ornamental characteristics from which to choose. Regarding size, there are crabapple trees as small as 8 feet and as tall as 30 feet. There are many tree forms available including round, oval, vase-shaped, narrow and upright, weeping or wide-spreading. You can choose a shape that fits a particular location. The colors of the blooms vary from white to pink, rose red to crimson and many other shades. The foliage of crabapples can be green, glossy green, reddish green or bronze green. Fruits can be pea-size to 2 inches and come in a range of colors: red, yellow, orange or green. There are trees that bloom and bear fruit in alternate years only. It's best to avoid this characteristic and enjoy the flowers and fruit every year.



Malus 'Prairifire' fruit

photo: Missouri Botanical Garden

A few cultivars recommended by both the University of North Carolina Extension and the Virginia Cooperative Extension exemplify the variety found among crabapples. *Malus floribunda* is a spreading form that grows to 25 feet with pink to white flowers and amber fruit. *Malus 'Louisa'* is a weeping form that grows to 15 feet with red to pink flowers, glossy green leaves and yellow fruit. *Malus 'Professor Sprenger'* is an upright spreading form that grows to 25 feet, with pink to white flowers, and orange-red fruit. *Malus 'Prairifire'* grows to 20 feet with reddish green leaves, crimson to pink flowers and red fruit. There is one crabapple native to the Southeast, from zones 7 to 9, *Malus angustifolia*, southern crabapple. It has a rounded shape, grows 20 to 25 feet high and wide, with fragrant pink flowers and yellowish green fruit. It is a good source of food for wildlife.



Malus 'Prairifire'

photo: Missouri Botanical Garden

The crabapple can be planted as a specimen plant in the garden or planted in a grouping or as a border in the landscape. When planted as a group, their blooming is truly spectacular! From bud to full flowering can last up to four weeks. It's best to plant crabapples in an area where fruit drop won't be a problem, away from sidewalks, for example. Birds and other wildlife will consume the fruit. The trees also provide shelter and nesting habitats for birds. If you need a small to medium-sized ornamental tree that provides interest throughout the seasons, consider the crabapple. It is bound to make you happy (not crabby)!

References

- *Durr's Encyclopedia of Trees and Shrubs*, by Michael A. Durr
- [Superior Crabapple Trees for the Landscape](#), Horticulture Information Leaflet 8613, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service
- [Flowering Crabapple, Malus spp.](#), Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication 3010/3010-1483

- [The Best Crabapple Trees for Your Garden](#), Erik A. Draper, James A. Chatfield, and Kenneth D. Cochran, Brooklyn Botanic Garden
- [Crabapples A Selection Guide](#), Curt Peterson and Randy Heatley, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University