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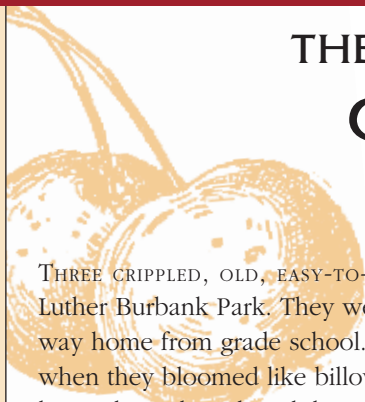
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## THE STORY OF PLANTS: CRABAPPLE

DANIEL MOUNT

THREE CRIPPLED, OLD, EASY-TO-CLIMB CRABAPPLES huddled beneath the statuesque oaks in Luther Burbank Park. They were loaded with ammunition for the wars we'd wage on the way home from grade school. They supplied fruit each fall for ruby-red, tart jelly. But it is when they bloomed like billowy low slung clouds each spring droning with thousands of honey bees that I loved them the best.

Arriving in Seattle 20 years ago I was distressed to find the leading flowering tree in the U.S. was snubbed by Northwest gardeners. Arthur Lee Jacobson barely mentioned crabapples in the first edition of *Trees of Seattle*. I don't think of myself as a chameleon, but I quickly adopted this prejudice adding crabapples, along with thunderstorms and fireflies, to the list of things I would miss.

When I talk of crabapples I am referring to the 30 or so ornamental and culinary species in the genus *Malus*. Crabapples are any member of this genus with fruits less than two inches in diameter whether a species, a cultivar, or a multibrid (a plant with many species in its makeup). I will waste no time on their confusing nomenclature which befuddles even the hybridizers. The common name is so old as to have left no trace of its origin, though it probably comes from the Old English "crabbed" meaning disagreeable, contrary, or crooked. Whether this meaning was indicating the rather twisted branching habit of the tree or the unpleasant flavor of the fruit is unclear.

Consider the evidence of Neolithic man's drying and storing of these sour vitamin C rich fruits. Just as Northwest tribes dried and stored the fruits of our native wetland-loving *Malus fusca* for winter use, it is hard to believe these miniature apples once used extensively in cider and jelly production would have a bad reputation. Now the fruits seem as out of date as the 1960s supper clubs that garnished steaks with crabapples pickled and dyed red.

Being in Rosaceae, or the rose family, crabapples can be as problematic as their kindred roses, apples, and cherries. I would say they have been rightly overlooked. But this prejudice is based on older cultivars. Since the 1950s, ornamental crabapple hybridizers have given up on finding the prettiest trees and have made disease resistance and size their highest priority. There are now small, upright, disease-resistant, and pretty trees suitable for urban gardens. Surprisingly, it is hard to find many of the nearly 900 crabapples in existence for sale, especially the newer commendable cultivars.

It is difficult to maintain my learned prejudice standing in the blousy grace of a flowering crab. They make lovely companions to the garish rhodies of May. So I have planted trees like the time tested *M. x zumi* 'Calocarpa' and admired the Seattle City Light recommendation, the pert *M.* 'Adirondack'. I ordered *M.* 'Satin Cloud' (available from Song Sparrow Nursery, [www.songsparrow.com](http://www.songsparrow.com)) one of the star new cultivars, with cinnamon scented flowers, red fall foliage, and a height of only six feet to plant in a large container this fall. And because I have the space I am also growing the edible and disease-free *M.* 'Chestnut' for its use as a pollenizer and for the nutty tasting fruits.

Thunderstorms have increased here in the past 20 years. In the second edition of *Trees of Seattle* Arthur Lee Jacobson has expanded his entry on crabapples, noting more than 140 different kinds. I, myself, am following the advice of Luther Burbank, who said, "For those who do not think, it is best to rearrange their prejudices once in a while." 🌱

*Read more of Daniel's thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog [www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com](http://www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com).*