

Fruitless Fruit Trees and Unusual Fruit

By Valerie Rose
October 7, 2016



A long, noble history

Fruit trees without fruit may seem like a contradiction, but in certain situations, these can be useful plantings. Several varieties of fruit trees bloom from late winter through spring, while not producing fruit later in the season. Such ornamental fruit trees are grown for their gorgeous flowers and foliage rather than an edible harvest. “These trees contribute an attractive framework to the landscape because of their height/volume, and their structure can be ornamental even in the winter landscape,” notes Jacqueline King, Program Coordinator at the Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center (NWREC) in Skagit County.

Ornamental fruit trees can prevent problems caused by fruiting varieties. “In home landscapes, dropped fruit can interfere with lawn mowing, and attract wasps, flies, and rodents,” said King. Ornamental trees, however, planted along streets, will shower cars and pedestrians with petals instead of pears and plums.

Such ornamental trees have long and noble history. King said that early uses of ornamental fruit trees in gardens appeared about 5,000 years ago during the Shang Dynasty, when Chinese kings and nobles began enclosing areas used for hunting and for growing fruits and vegetables. These ancient ornamental trees included flowering cherries and plums.

In modern times, the pink blossoms of ornamental plums herald the transition from winter to spring. Two of the earliest trees to bloom in the northwest are ‘Newport’ and ‘Krauter Vesuvius,’ followed by ‘Hollywood.’ These varieties have been tested at the NWREC here in Skagit County, and found to be resistant to many common diseases that can shorten the tree’s life.

Our cool maritime climate creates perfect conditions for diseases that can attack fruit trees, including anthracnose, powdery mildew, bacterial canker and apple scab. Selecting varieties with proven disease and pest resistance is an important step in choosing a tree you will enjoy for years. The WSU publication, “Ornamental Fruit Trees for the Puget Sound Region,” lists disease-resistant varieties of crabapples, flowering cherries, flowering plums, and even ornamental pears and apricots.

The foliage of ornamental fruit trees can enhance a yard or landscape. Ornamental plums, with leaves of bronze or maroon, are common street trees, providing colorful contrast to the more widespread green leaves and boughs. Leaf shape can also add unique texture to the landscape. The finely-cut leaves of the Golden Raindrops crabapple resemble those of a Japanese maple. Some varieties also offer attractive fall leaf color. The ‘Prairiefire’ crabapple has outstanding autumn hues, from red to orange and apricot.



This crabapple tree produces flowers in the spring that turn from pink to white and produces abundant fruit in the late summer. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Crabapples are often used as ornamental trees, whose small fruit is consumed by birds. The smallish, bright fruit adds color to the landscape through the fall, sometimes lasting into the winter. However, several varieties with larger fruit are favored for culinary uses. A few varieties are sweet enough to be eaten off the tree, though they do not store well.

'Puget Spice,' a white-flowered variety, was developed by WSU Mount Vernon in 2012. It is good for jelly, pickling, and especially for blending in fresh or hard cider. An heirloom variety, 'Whitney,' is good for fresh eating as well as pickling. The tree features white flowers and fairly large, round, yellow fruit, with a sweet-tart flavor. 'Whitney' originated in Illinois in 1869, and is often found in old orchard sites.

Crabapples with high tannin content are often added to either fresh or hard cider, to enhance the flavor. Tannin adds the element of astringency, which is lacking or very low in the dessert apples that usually make up most of the juice from which cider is made. Some apple varieties, mainly found in western France and England, have been bred over centuries for high tannin content. Until quite recently, these specialized cider apple varieties were rare in the U.S. Crabapples usually served to provide the needed tannin for American ciders – One variety, 'Hewes Virginia Crab,' dates back to colonial days and was planted by Thomas Jefferson in his orchard at Monticello.

Throughout history, flowering trees, both ornamental and fruiting, have enhanced gardens around the world. Modern gardeners can now draw on research to choose varieties that suit areas from small yards to sweeping landscapes. Many ornamental and fruiting varieties can be seen at the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation Garden on the west side of NWREC buildings on Memorial Highway in Mount Vernon.



Some crabapples produce fruit that is good for making jam. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

- “Ornamental Fruit Trees for the Puget Sound Region.” Gary Moulton, Jacqueline King & Carol Miles. Washington State University, 2013.
https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2109/2014/12/Handout_Ornamentals131.pdf
- *Fruit Handbook for Western WA*. Washington State University. Gary Moulton & Jacqueline King.
http://whatcom.wsu.edu/gardenshare/documents/fruit_handbook_western_wa.pdf
- “The Magic of Malus.” James A. Chatfield and Erik.A. Draper

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.

Know & Grow Workshop

What: WSU Master Gardener Know & Grow
“Ornamental Tree Fruit for Garden and Landscape”
Jackie King, Program Coordinator, Northwest Washington Research and Extension Center

When: Tuesday, October 18

Time: 1:00 P.M - 2:30 P.M

Where: WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)

Cost: Free

Questions Call the WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0.