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GARDEN NOTES

CRABBY THOUGH IT MAY BE, IT IS THE PERFECT TREE

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Though many people think of it as a messy tree, the crabapple is a near-perfect ornamental for most landscapes.

“I love crabapple trees because they are one of the few trees that have excellent ornamental characteristics year round,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “In the spring, crabapple trees have a spectacular bloom that lasts three to four weeks. And, once they are through blooming, the trees have a nice shape and provide shade throughout the hot summer months. Another benefit of crabapple trees is their ability to pollinate most other apple trees.”

By fall, the colorful fruit has developed and is quite showy, and the foliage is attractive until the leaves drop, he adds. In the newer persistent fruited varieties, the crabapples do not drop, but remain on the tree throughout the winter. This attracts birds and adds interest during the winter as the snow covers the graceful, colorful branches.

By definition, a crabapple is any apple tree that produces fruit smaller than two inches in diameter, he explains. Crabapples are technically edible, but very few are actually worth the trouble to pick. However, crabapples have been crossed with other apple varieties to produce some very good apple trees. One example is the Granny Smith. Most people feel one of its parents is a crabapple.

“Another reason I love crabapple trees is their hardiness,” Goodspeed says. “They have the ability to adapt to almost any soil type and watering schedule. They can grow in areas with harsh, long winters and withstand most of the abuse that is dished out by children and animals. They also attract wildlife and are long-lived.”

Many of the older homesteads throughout northern Utah have old crabapple trees that have survived years after the house was abandoned. Tough and well-adapted trees, crabapples are easy to grow and can be planted anytime the soil is not frozen. They are a moderate-to fast-growing tree that begins to provide shade within just a few years. They also come in different shapes, from weeping to round or spreading.

“There are literally hundreds of differently named crabapple varieties sold in nurseries throughout the United States,” he says. “This can make selecting a variety very difficult. Here is

a small list that I like to recommend.”

If it's a weeping crabapple you want, consider Molten Lava which has a somewhat spreading habit with white flowers in the spring and vivid red fruit flowing down the branches in the fall, he suggests. Red Jade also has white flowers and red fruit, but is more graceful, and has a better winter shape. Other weeping varieties include White Cascade and Louisa.

Upright crabapple trees are more popular because they add shade and proportion to the landscape, he says. Sugar Tyme offers white spring blossoms and a rounded form. Klehms Improved Bechtel has large, beautiful double pink flowers. A couple of newer varieties worth searching for include Prairifire, which has coral-red flowers with purple-red fruit, and Indian Summer with its rose-red flowers and red fruit.

A nice, small crabapple variety that grows about 10 feet tall, with a formal round shape is Coralburst, Goodspeed says. The pink blossoms and tiny red fruits on this variety add interest most of the year, and its size and shape work well in formal settings.

Take the time to look at the fruit on crabapple trees this fall, and enjoy the color they bring into the landscape, he says. If the fruit on the ground bothers you, consider shopping for a persistent fruited variety. With all the choices available, there is bound to be a crabapple tree that will fit in your landscape.

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