The Mother of Crabapples

Autumn Spotlight on the Peters Hill Malus Collection

Nancy Rose, Editor of Arnoldia

Crabapples (Malus spp.) are best known for their extravagant spring displays of white, pink, and rosy red flowers. Arboretum visitors who climb to the top of Peters Hill around mid-May are rewarded with the sight of the Malus collection—numbering some 440 plants—in glorious bloom. But while the blossoms are certainly beautiful, they're not especially long lasting; the floral show on a given tree typically lasts a week—less if heavy rain or strong winds hit.

Though perhaps less appreciated, the fall display in the Malus collection is equally worthy and a lot longer lasting. By early October many of the trees are loaded with yellow, orange, red, or purple fruit. Some fruits change color as they mature and soften; tea crabapple (M. hupehensis), for example, changes from bright yellow to cider orange. Fruit persistence varies among individual crabapples, but the colorful display typically lasts at least a month, and up to five or six months for some. The Arboretum introduction 'Donald Wyman'—one of the very best cultivars for colorful, persistent fruit—often has some of its bright red fruit still hanging on when the tree begins to bloom in the spring.

Malus fruits come in a range of shapes and sizes. Most are essentially round, though looking for subtle differences (perhaps more oval, or conical) can be useful for identification. One unusual species in the collection, M. kansuensis f. calva, has ribbed fruits that look like tiny pumpkins. Crabapples grown for ornamental use usually have fruits smaller than 1 inch in diameter, and many of the best crabapple cultivars for landscaping have fruit ranging from ¼- to ½-inch in diameter. When they drop from the tree these smaller sized fruit don’t cause a litter problem (a complaint often leveled at larger-fruited crabapples). They don’t always make it to the ground, though, since the bite-sized fruit are favored by birds such as robins and cedar waxwings who eagerly gobble up the crop during fall migrations.

In addition to the impressive fruit display, you may also see at least a little fall foliage color in the Malus collection. Crabapples aren’t usually noted for this trait, but a few species and cultivars often do develop some nice autumnal tints. Look for red, orange, or purple tones on the leaves of Malus tchonoskii, M. spontanea, M. ‘Prairifire’, and M. ‘Purple Prince’, among others. A combination of fruit and foliage color can be especially attractive, as with the rich purple foliage and bright yellow fruits of tea crabapple (M. hupehensis). This species and M. sargentii are among the plants propagated from the living collections that will be available at the Members’ Plant Giveaway on September 20.

Apple or Crabapple?

Apples and crabapples are all in the genus Malus. In horticultural terms, Malus trees with fruit larger than two inches in diameter are classified as apples, while those with smaller fruits are called crabapples. This split serves primarily to differentiate Malus grown for direct eating (apples) from those grown primarily for ornamental traits (crabapples). There are exceptions, of course; a number of crabapples like ‘Chestnut’ and ‘Whitney’ have delicious fruits—just shy of two inches wide—that are perfect for fresh eating.

Malus ‘Donald Wyman’ (323-54*A) is among a number of choice crabapple cultivars developed at the Arnold Arboretum.
Some Highlights of the *Malus* Collection at the Arnold Arboretum

This fall, explore the beauty and diversity of apples and crabapples in the collections of the Arnold Arboretum.

*Clockwise, from upper left:* Named for the Arboretum’s horticulturist from 1935 to 1970, *Malus* ‘Donald Wyman’ features bright red, persistent fruits which provide months of visual appeal; Sargent crabapple (*M. sargentii*), named for Arboretum Founding Director Charles Sprague Sargent, bears small, bright red fruits that often persist into winter; *M. ‘Henry Kohankie’* displays yellow and orange fall foliage along with fairly large (1¼-inch diameter) red fruits; fruits of *M. hupehensis*, the tea crabapple, turn from yellow to cider orange as they soften and are then eagerly consumed by birds; *M. ‘Golden Hornet’* is an English cultivar that bears a profusion of red-blushed golden fruits.

Collections Up Close: Considering Crabapples

Sunday, October 19 from 1:00–3:00pm

See page 14 for event details