

This Spring...Be Crabby!!

Flowering crabapples are best known for their small size and prolific floral display that usually lasts about three to four weeks and peaks around Mother's Day. Lesser known is their extreme hardiness, adaptability to various soil types, and colorful ornamental fruit. The fruit display on some varieties starts in mid-summer and can last on most varieties throughout fall and well into winter.

Crabapples have gotten a bad rap in the past because some varieties can get a disease called "scab" that causes the leaves to look unattractive and drop late in the summer. Some types, especially those with large fruit, were also rather messy if they dropped their fruit early in the season. However, recent advancements in plant breeding have changed all of that. Many new varieties have been cultivated that are very disease resistant, have much smaller fruit, and a much neater habit.

Crabapples (along with some other trees and shrubs) have also been criticized because their rootstocks tend to sucker. A few years ago, we started experimenting with a new sprout inhibitor product after hearing about how well it worked. We were a little skeptical at first because it sounded too good to be true, but after trying it, we can honestly say that it is very effective, even when only used once a year.

Another recent development in crabapple cultivation is the addition of top-grafted varieties to the crabapple repertoire. These dwarf trees are unique in that they stay considerably shorter than most other crabapple varieties, ranging from only about 5-10 ft. in height. Their compact size makes them the perfect trees for tight spaces in the landscape. 'Tina' is one such variety whose crimson buds open to single white fragrant blooms and whose tiny fruits are a brilliant red. 'Royal Gem' is a nice top-grafted variety for its vibrant rose-red flowers set against burgundy-tinged deep green foliage. 'Cinderella' and 'Lollipop' are both noted for their petite, rounded form and their prolific snow-white blooms.

If you want to add some year-round beauty to your landscape but are looking for something with a bit more height, there are also some great crabapple varieties that are not top-grafted. Probably our favorite rose-red bloomer is 'Purple Prince.' As the name indicates, it boasts striking purple foliage that becomes bronze green with age. This variety has proven to be extremely disease resistant and its attractive blue-purple fruit persists late into the season. 'Red Jewel' is an outstanding white blooming variety known for its bright cherry-red fruit. Its narrow, upright form allows it to be planted closer to homes and makes it a nice choice for along the driveway. One of the newest and most unusual additions to our crabapple collection is 'Royal Raindrops.' Its purple cutleaf foliage and excellent disease resistance set it apart from other crabapple varieties, and its bright magenta-pink blooms are not soon to be forgotten.