

Carefree crabapples for the garden

By Nancy Buley

Think of spring in the garden, and ornamental flowering crabapples come to mind. Clouds of fragrant blossoms suspended over sweeping beds of daffodils, tulips, primroses and violets are a sight to behold.

The spring show of blooms ranges in color from snow white to pastel pinks to magenta and deep carmine. Modern, disease-resistant varieties sport bright, healthy summer foliage in colors that range from bright green to bronze-green to deep purple. The fallen leaves of autumn reveal branches laden with sparkling fruits that birds find to be irresistible. Tiny apples ranging in color from bright yellow and gold to shades of orange, red and purple, linger late into the season, providing winter interest as well as an important food source for birds and other wildlife.

With so many cultivars available, how can you possibly decide which is best for your garden?



Photo by Nancy Buley.



Photo courtesy of J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.

Birds eat the fruit of these all-season ornamental trees; (r) 'Sugar Tyme'

Take the advice of Alan Branhagen, Director of Horticulture at Powell Gardens of Kingsville, Mo. He is an ardent admirer and enthusiastic champion of these all-season ornamental trees.

"Crabapples are surely one of the finest ornamental trees for songbirds in the fall and winter,"

Branhagen says. "Because the ornamental appeal of the fruits lasts for months, I select the cultivars based first on their fruiting nature, then by foliage. Flower color is my third consideration. Most of the newer selections are very resistant to foliar diseases that plagued older varieties."

In celebration of Earth Day 2007, Powell Garden volunteers planted five each of 20 crabapples a mix of new and time-tested cultivars. All are notable for good to excellent disease resistance and clean, healthy foliage. All have small, persistent fruits that are highly decorative in fall and winter, and attractive to wildlife.

The bare root trees were donated by J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co., a wholesale propagator of shade and flowering trees located in Boring, Oregon. As propagators of more than 60 modern, disease-resistant cultivars, we recognize that crabapple performance is highly localized. Our contribution

of 100 trees to Powell Gardens for planting in their beautiful new wildflower meadow will help determine the best performers for the Kansas City metropolitan area and other regions with similar growing conditions. We anticipate that all will perform very well. Time will tell, and we look forward to receiving feedback from Powell Gardens and sharing it with the local gardening community.

Branhagen claims great fondness for the species types – floribunda and its derivatives, and Sargent and cultivars derived from this excellent species. These include diminutive cultivars such as Candy mint, Pink Princess and Firebird®. He's fond of Zumi, and the horizontally spreading Tea crabs (*Malus hupehensis*), such as Strawberry Parfait. Harvest Gold® is one of his favorites, appreciated for its display of persistent golden yellow fruit against bright blue winter skies.



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“I will be carefully observing and evaluating all the newbies we planted, and surely will have some new favorites in time!” Branhagen exclaims. He invites people to visit the garden and discover their own favorites – to be

area. Growers are particularly enthused about Royal Raindrops® Crabapple, a new introduction that is making itself at home in gardens and landscapes across the region.

“It’s been my top crab since it came out, says Jeremy Johnson, of Johnson’s Garden Centers. “The fruit is great, the cutleaf foliage unique, and the flowers beautiful. We’ve been switching over from Prairifire, which is a great tree and an excellent performer, but we like this one better.”

For small space gardens, the columnar Adirondack Crabapple is a winner. Outstanding weepers include the pink-flowered Louisa and the white-blossomed Molten Lava™. It is so prostrate in character that it may be trained along a fence or espaliered against a wall to showcase its autumn cascade of bright red, persistent fruits.

Birds flock to feast on the bright red, extra-long lasting fruits of Red Jewel® Crabapple that grow beside the greenhouses at Suburban Lawn & Garden, according to Libby Burdsall, horticulturist at the Kansas City nursery. A top-seller, it is also appreciated for excellent disease resistance.

Birds also seem to favor the bright red fruits of Firebird®, the dusky maroon fruits of Purple Prince and the tiny, beak-size fruits of Royal Raindrops® and Pink Princess. Your favorite nursery professional is your best ally in helping you choose among the many fine cultivars available in local garden centers.

As the Powell Gardens planting grows and matures, it will be a delightful place for gardeners and tree lovers to observe and enjoy ornamental crabapples through the seasons. In spring, it will be a haven for bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and other pollinators, as well as a place of fragrance and beauty for visitors. Come fall and winter, it will serve as a colorful pantry for birds and other wildlife in search of food to help carry them through the long, cold months. Then we’ll welcome spring, when the cycle of beauty will begin anew.

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Ornamental Crabapple planting at Powell Gardens

Adams
Adirondack
Cardinal
David
Candymint
Firebird®
Floribunda
Louisa
Mary Potter
Molten Lava®
Pink Princess™
Prairifire
Prairie Rose
Purple Prince
Red Jewel™
Royal Raindrops®
Sargent
Strawberry Parfait
Sugar Tyme®
Zumi Calocarpa

Descriptions and photos of these trees may be found on the Powell Gardens website, www.powell-gardens.org.



Photo by Jeff Lafranz.

‘Purple Prince’

enjoyed at the garden or planted in their own landscapes, courtyards or containers. Many of the donated cultivars are already being grown and sold by nurseries and garden centers in the greater Kansas City

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