

Culinary Crab Apples

Flowering crab apples are a lovely addition to any garden. The showy blossoms explode in white, pink, or red billows of color. The fruit of most crab apple trees is too small to harvest and usually left for the birds. However, there are some crab apple cultivars that produce not only beautiful blossoms, but also fruit large enough for use in your kitchen.

What determines when an apple is not an apple, but a crab apple instead? Traditionally, any apple tree producing fruit less than 2 inches in diameter is considered a crab apple. Crab apples are further distinguished as mini-fruited (less than ¼ inch), small-fruited (¼ to ½ inch), medium-size (½ to 1 inch) and large-fruited (1 to 2 inch). Crab apples for human consumption mostly fall into the large-fruited category, with a few medium-size exceptions.

'**Centennial**' is a compact tree that produces heavy crops of 1 ½ inch oval fruit. These crab apples are sweet enough to eat fresh! The fruit, which ripens in mid-August, is bright red with white juicy flesh. If the crab apples make it as far as the kitchen, they can be used for canning or jelly. Red flower buds open to showy white blossoms. The 'Centennial' tree will grow to 8 feet and is fairly scab resistant.

'**Dolgo**' is commonly planted as it is an all-purpose crab apple. It can be eaten fresh, pickled, canned, or used for jelly, apple butter, or cider. The fruit is 1 ½ inches in diameter, more round than the 'Centennial,' and bright red. The prolific fruit ripens in early September and will quickly fall to the ground if not picked. The flower buds are pink, then open to white. The one drawback to 'Dolgo' is its scab susceptibility. In order to maintain a healthy tree and fruit quality, a regular spray program is required.



Evereste Crab Apples

'**Evereste**' may be the most beautiful crab apple tree. In spring it will literally be covered from top to bottom with fragrant long-lasting white flowers. In summer, the 1-inch-diameter bright red fruits adorn the entire tree. Whatever fruit you do not pick will hang on the tree well into the winter and will eventually succumb to birds. The fruit makes excellent apple butter, or it can be pickled. These crab apples, mixed with other apples, make a great cider. As if this isn't enough, the tree is extremely disease resistant and easy to care for. The tree grows up

to 10 feet, has semi-weeping branches, and requires little pruning. If you have room for only one crab apple, this is it!

'**Hewes**' (also known as 'Hughes' or 'Virginia') was most common in eighteenth-century Virginia as a cider apple. The fruit is about 1 ½ inches round, dull red, with flavors described as both sugary and pungently tart, cinnamon-flavored, and ambrosial. The tree is a vigorous grower with wide-spread branches. The flower buds are pink, opening to white blooms. This crab apple is excellent for cider. While we have no specific data on scab susceptibility, this cultivar is probably not resistant.

'Maypole' is a columnar tree, perfect for planting in small areas, even in pots. Growth of the tree is vertical (8 feet) with almost no branching. 'Maypole' has deep-pink blossoms which smother the tree. The leaves are reddish in the summer and then turn burgundy in the fall. The deep-red crab apples are about 2 inches in diameter, ripening in September. The flesh is also a deep red, making this crab apple an excellent choice for jelly. It also makes delicious apple butter and cider. This tree is resistant to scab.

'Siberian' has a spreading growth habit with white flowers. The crimson yellow-striped 1 inch round fruit is superb for pickles and jelly. These trees are vigorous growers and produce large crops very young. They are susceptible to scab and require a regular spray program.

'Whitney' is an older, very popular cultivar that is good for fresh eating. The red, yellow-striped fruit is crisp, juicy, and mildly subacid. The tree has an upright shape, is very productive, and bears young. The flowers are white. 'Whitney' is susceptible to scab; therefore, a scab spray program is required for a usable harvest.



Maypole Crab Apple Trees



3 Wickson Crab Apples in front of Stayman Winesap

'Wickson' is a popular crab apple for hard cider. It does not need to be mixed with other apples to make an excellent cider. 'Wickson' tops the scale of sugar content with a Brix reading of at least 19.2°. [Brix is a measurement of soluble solids in the juice (mostly sugar) and represents the percentage of sugar in the juice.] Unlike most crab apples, this one is a large tree on seedling rootstock, so look for a semi-dwarf rootstock to control the size for easier maintenance and harvest. 'Wickson' is susceptible to scab, so a spray program is needed. Some do not consider 'Wickson' a crab apple since the fruit can exceed 2 inches in diameter. However, it is commonly thought of as a crab and is included here since it is popular for use in cider.

Nothing beats homemade crab apple butter or tart crab apple cider. So consider combining beauty and food production in your yard. Of course, we love birds too, so please plant a nice flowering small-fruited crab apple for them as well. Some excellent cultivars for this purpose:

- 'Indian Magic' (spreading structure, pink blooms),
- 'Louisa' (weeping structure, pink blooms),
- 'Madonna' (upright structure, white blooms),
- 'Purple Prince' (spreading structure, deep-rose blooms, dark purple leaves and fruit), or
- 'Zumi calocarpa' (spreading structure, white blooms).



Purple Prince blooms

These are all disease resistant, beautiful, and attractive to bees and birds.

Linguistic Note: The reference to crab apples is often written as crabapples or just crabs. Research in a 1904, a modern, and a horticulture-specific dictionary, shows us that the correct writing is as two words: crab apples. Shortening this to crabs is also acceptable.

Crab Apple Butter

- 5 lbs crab apples
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 1 ½ cups brown sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp nutmeg
- ¼ tsp ground ginger
- 1/8 tsp salt

Wash crab apples and remove leaves. It is not necessary to remove the stems. Combine with 4 cups water and simmer until soft, about 20 minutes. Run the mixture through a food mill to remove stems, seeds, and skins. Add remaining ingredients and cook slowly in a 300° oven until thickened (about 5 hours). While the mixture is still very hot, ladle into hot, sterilized jars and cap with hot sterilized lids.

Note: This butter can be made with 100% 'Dolgo' or 'Maypole' crab apples. If using 'Evereste,' substitute about 20% by weight of the crab apples with a nice eating apple to make the butter less tart. For instance, use 4 lbs 'Evereste' and 1 lb of something like 'Gala,' 'King,' or 'Granny Smith.'

Crab Apple Sources

[Raintree Nursery](#)

[Stark Brothers](#)

[Trees of Antiquity](#)

Resources

Beach, S. A. (State of New York Agriculture Department). *The Apples of New York, Volume II*. Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Company, 1905.

Fiala, Fr. John L. Flowering Crabapples, *The Genus Malus*. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1994.

Manhart, Warren. *Apples for the 21st Century*. Portland, OR: North American Tree Company, 1995.

Washington State University Cooperative Extension. [Crabapples for Western Washington Landscapes](#). 1996, EB1809.