

It's a Gardener's World!

Genesis tells us that the world's first fruit was the apple. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. In any case, it wouldn't have been a Golden Delicious or any of the varieties you see for sale in supermarkets. It would have been the tart-tasting crab apple. This September I've witnessed a spectacular harvest of Crab Apples on trees around Stokesley. There's one in the front garden of Jan, our Stokesley D&S champion, one next to number 19 Levenside & another at the end of Grange Drive!



A symbol of fertility and a forager's delight, the ancestor of the modern cultivated apple, the crab apple is an ancient thing. One of the ancestors of the cultivated apple (of which there are more than 6,000 varieties), it can live to up to 100 years. Why 'crab apple' though? I wondered if it was because the fruit was so lip-puckerlingly sour, but most sources think it's because the tree itself has an irregular, rounded shape and a wide, spreading canopy. With greyish brown, flecked bark, the trees can become quite gnarled & twisted & the twigs often develop spines. This 'crabbed' appearance may have influenced its common name, 'crab apple'.

When we talk about someone being 'crabby' we mean that they are grouchy & grumpy, irritable & bad-tempered. It's been quite a test over the past few months to not feel grumpy all the time, especially with all the confusion & chaos surrounding going on holiday abroad – countries suddenly posing a public health risk & travellers suddenly facing quarantine on their return home. And what about those businesses ready to re-open their doors, how must they feel when, with everything in place for safe working, they are told that a local Lockdown means they must put everything on hold again. Covid-19 can certainly be blamed for making people feel bitter. But we can be sour-faced or we can make good with the 'lot' we've been given.

Crab apples have long been associated with love and marriage. It was said that if you throw the pips into the fire while saying the name of your love, & if the pips explode, the love is true. Apple wood was burned by the Celts during fertility rites and festivals, and Shakespeare, a man who knew his apples & wild plants, made reference to crab apples in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labour Lost*. In *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'*, the mischievous faery, Puck, boasts of bobbing like a roasted crab apple in a cup of spiced ale. And in *'Love's Labour Lost'* he mentions roasted crab apples hissing in a bowl.

Did you know?

Crab apples have a number of traditional and folkloric uses in the British Isles. They were made into a spiced drink at Lammastide (1st August), and young women used to lay out the fruit on a loft floor in the shape of their various boyfriends' initials on 29th September each year. Those initials which were least nibbled by mice, kicked over by passing beetles or relatively undiminished by mildew were said to indicate the boy with the warmest feelings for the lady concerned!

The village of Egremont in Cumbria has, since 1267, held a Crab Apple Fair, at which the fruit would be distributed to the peasants. No doubt they were overwhelmed with gratitude. These days, however, the fair is the site of the annual Gurning Competition, in which folk put their heads through a horse collar and see who can make the most alarming 'funny face'!

Nowadays, & for the most part, gardeners plant crab apple trees for their spectacular spring blossom. Crab apple flowers can range from pure white to deep pink and their apples can be red or yellow. However the fruit often gets thrown into the compost bin or left to rot. The crab apples usually just fall to the pavement & make a mess/feast for wasps! A pity because a great, and traditional, way to preserve crab apples, is to make a delicious & exquisite, jewel-coloured jelly. Commercially produced crab apple jelly is hard to find. Farmers' markets and WI stalls are probably your best bet. Recipes for

crab apple jelly are whispered down through generations, hand-written in pencil on slips of paper and tucked inside old cookery books. Have you got one?

This year is all about preservation.

The dictionary definition of 'preservation' is 'the act of keeping something the same as it is in order to prevent it from decaying or of preventing it from being damaged'. When you look up 'preservation' in a thesaurus you get a list of word equivalents including protection, conservation, safeguarding, defending, maintaining, perpetuating, supporting – all words which seem to have a particularly poignant meaning at this time of the Coronavirus. How we live our lives, how we go to school, how we return to work, how we go the shops, how we come back to worship at church – these are all things which we're having to do differently so that we stay safe & preserve that which is dear to us.

So when you feel 'crabby', think of these words from Psalm 36: 'Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O Lord, you preserve both man and beast. How priceless is your unfailing love!'

And from this week's Psalm 103: 'Praise the Lord, O my soul, & forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins & heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit & crowns you with love & compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's,'
If that doesn't bring a smile to your face, I don't know what will!