The Shy Yet Elegant Crabapple—‘Blanche Ames’

Michael Yanny

The little-known *Malus* ‘Blanche Ames’ is both beautiful and unique.

In my travels throughout the United States and Canada, I have seen few trees that rival *Malus* ‘Blanche Ames’ for beauty and elegance. It has bloom qualities similar to the flowering cherries commonly seen in the eastern and western United States, and its graceful, slightly weeping form is reminiscent of the Japanese maples that I have always wanted to but cannot grow in the harsh Wisconsin climate. Yet even with its many superb attributes, few people know about ‘Blanche Ames’ and very few nurseries grow and sell the tree.

The plant that was to become the future ‘Blanche Ames’ was selected by Dr. Karl Sax of the Arnold Arboretum from a group of open-pollinated seedlings of *Malus spectabilis* ‘Riversii’ that he had raised in 1939. Originally known as “Sax #6639,” the tree was introduced into the Arboretum collections in 1947, but was not named ‘Blanche Ames’ by Dr. Sax until February 1955—to honor the noted botanical illustrator Blanche Ames, wife of the former Supervisor of the Arboretum, Dr. Oakes Ames.

As a young tree, ‘Blanche Ames’ is taller than its width, but with age, it broadens out to form a dome wider than its height. The original plant at the Arnold Arboretum, which was 15 feet tall (4.6 meters) at fifteen years of age, is now, at fifty years old, 23 feet tall and 31 feet wide (7 x 9.5 meters). By comparison, a 28-year-old specimen at Boerner Botanical Gardens in Hales Corners, Wisconsin, is about 25 feet tall and 25 feet wide (7.6 x 7.6 meters). In silhouette, the tree is very striking, with its purplish-brown limbs ascending upwards and outwards, like streams of water flowing from a fountain. In winter, the drooping maroon branchlets delicately mask the light gray trunks.

In southern Wisconsin, ‘Blanche Ames’ leafs out in early spring before most other woody plants, at about the same time as *Larix decidua*, in early to mid-April. About a month later, along with *Malus* ‘Dorothea’ and ‘Profusion’, its crimson buds open to reveal white, semi-double flowers with a pink blush and a sweet scent. In full bloom ‘Blanche Ames’ creates a billowy, cloud-like impression. The individual flowers, about 1.3 inches in diameter (3.5 cm), are unique among crabapples: the approximately fifteen narrow strap-like petals, when open, reveal a center full of golden stamens. The fully opened flowers, which look something like *Rosa multiflora* blossoms, are exquisite when seen close up. The tree has been a consistent annual bloomer in the Milwaukee area, as well as in and around Boston.

The fruit of ‘Blanche Ames’, while colorful, is not persistent enough to be considered a major attribute. The small, 0.3-inch-diameter (9 mm) crabapples color to a golden yellow by early September in Madison, Wisconsin. Within a month, the slightly elongated fruit changes to a cardinal red, though a small shaded portion of the fruit usually remains yellow. Late-October frosts soften up the tiny crabapples, turning them a garnet brown. By late November, most of the fruit is taken by birds, thus eliminating the need for any fruit
clean-up. Fall color may vary from year to year: in Madison, Wisconsin, the foliage was an attractive orange-red in 1989, but in 1990 it was a disappointing yellow.

Disease Resistance
In any discussion of the ornamental potential of crabapple trees, disease resistance is of major importance. The response of 'Blanche Ames' to the three most serious crabapple diseases is as follows:

1. Powdery Mildew (Podosphaera leucotricha) is a foliar fungus disease that coats the new terminal growth of trees with a white powdery substance. The mildew causes leaves to become twisted, narrow, and cupped. It weakens terminal shoots, making them more prone to winter kill. This disease is a serious problem only in the hot, humid climates found in many parts of the southeastern United States. Unfortunately 'Blanche Ames' has not been evaluated to any extent under such conditions, and a meaningful disease rating cannot be given as yet.

2. Fireblight (Erwinia amylovora) is a bacterial disease and a major concern because of its ability to kill or severely deform susceptible Malus cultivars. The bacteria enter trees primarily through flowers, growing tips, and open wounds, transmitted by insects or by rainwater splash of the bacterial ooze. Once in the tree, the disease moves quickly through the vascular system. Symptoms of attack are a sudden browning or blackening of new vigorously growing shoots with a characteristic shepherd’s crook bend at the tip.

Fireblight was reported on 'Blanche Ames' only twice in the twenty-seven years from
The flowers of 'Blanche Ames' are unique among crabapple trees. Photo by Michael Yanny.

1963 to 1990, and those infections were rated as mild. Ratings were done primarily in the Midwest, the East, and the Pacific Northwest; unfortunately, no trees have been evaluated in the Plains states where fireblight occurs with great regularity.

3. Apple Scab (Venturia inaequalis) is a fungus disease whose development is favored by wet, humid weather conditions. Symptoms include smoky gray spots on the leaves and brownish, corky spots on the fruit. Severely susceptible cultivars may be completely defoliated by mid-summer in many seasons. Mildly susceptible trees, on the other hand, show little evidence of the disease except for a few inconspicuous leaf spots.

'Blanche Ames' has had mixed reviews in terms of resistance to scab. Reports from the Pacific Northwest in 1985 indicate that 'Blanche Ames' is severely susceptible to scab and is therefore not a good tree for that climate. In the drier, less humid areas, such as the Plains and the Rocky Mountain states, apple scab is of little concern. Midwest reports from 1973 to 1990 show 'Blanche Ames' to be only mildly susceptible to scab. Reports from the East, based primarily on observations at the Arnold Arboretum, show 'Blanche Ames' to be only mildly susceptible to apple scab. However, on two occasions, in 1973 and again in 1979, severe scab was reported on single trees, indicating that continued evaluation is necessary.

Propagation and Cultivation
Propagation of 'Blanche Ames' has been done by chip-bud grafting onto seedling understock in late summer. Because 'Blanche Ames' stops
The winter habit of a forty-year-old specimen of 'Blanche Ames' growing at the Arnold Arboretum. Photo by Peter Del Tredici.

growing relatively late in the season, it should be one of the last ornamental crabapples to be budded. In Wisconsin good results have been achieved in mid-August. When budded on seedling understock, trees will send up sucker shoots from the stock. This can be an annual maintenance headache. For this reason, a non-suckering, clonal rootstock, such as ELMA 111, should be used. Another possible alternative may be the rooting of softwood cuttings, thus eliminating the understock altogether.

Like most ornamental crabapples, 'Blanche Ames' can be a tough, durable urban tree. The full extent of its hardiness, however, is unknown. Vigorously growing two-year-old trees planted in southeastern Wisconsin (USDA Zone 5a) showed some tip dieback on young branches, indicating the need for further hardiness testing in colder zones, as well as in the deep south.

'Blanche Ames,' with its many beautiful attributes, has numerous landscape uses. The tree can serve well as an accent or a focal point
in the garden. Imagine 'Blanche Ames' in full flower in the distance, fronting a border stand of tall, dark-green Austrian pines (Pinus nigra). In this situation, the tree will stand out and give the border depth and dimension as well as multi-season interest. Another use might be as a specimen limbed up high enough to accommodate a garden bench; in time, its pendulous branchlets will make a wonderful private sitting area, the destination of a garden path. And finally, the graceful 'Blanche Ames' overhanging a pond will create spectacular reflections when in bloom. Indeed, there are many possibilities for this fine tree, and it seems unlikely that it will remain unknown much longer. But who knows? Obscurity may be the nature of the very elegant 'Blanche Ames'.

References


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