A Celebration of Crabapples: Book Review

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The late Father John Fiala was well known in horticultural circles for his lifelong work to improve lilacs and flowering crabapples. For a few years, his horticultural legacy endured in the landscape of Falconskeape, his garden in Medina, Ohio, but ultimately preservation efforts proved unsuccessful. Fortunately, Fiala's great devotion to crabapples has found more lasting commemoration through the publication of his book, Flowering Crabapples: The Genus Malus.

The crabapple, touted across much of the country as "America's favorite flowering tree," is valued for its adaptability to cold climates, ease of production, and great diversity of color and habit. Defined as those taxa in the genus Malus that bear fruits 2.5 inches in diameter or smaller, crabapple trees range in shape from rounded to columnar and weeping, with flower color extending from white to deep reds and purples, and fruit from black-red to brilliant gold. Interest in developing a better crabapple has, over the decades, led to an accumulation of some 900 named varieties. The story of their development and landscape use, the subject of Fiala's book, is of particular significance to the Arnold Arboretum and other institutions with a long-standing commitment to crabapple display and evaluation.

Clearly this handsome volume is much more a horticultural overview than a technical treatise, and while some of Fiala's taxonomic details may remain in dispute, the absence heretofore of any color-illustrated, near-current guide to crabapples makes it a valuable contribution to the literature. With separate sections on landscape uses, propagation, pests and disease, a solid discussion of tree form, and 245 color photographs, crabapples at last have a work that speaks to their value and versatility in the landscape. Yet perhaps the book's strongest value is its history of the events and people that have brought us the crabapple of today.

Father Fiala, also the author of Lilacs: The Genus Syringa, presents a highly personal perspective on crabapple history. An inveterate breeder, he admitted that, "Like most hybridizers working over a lifetime, I am certain I have named too many crabapples, but, be assured, I have discarded a hundred times more!" In profiling the key figures in crabapple breeding, Fiala discusses the commercial nurseries and university programs whose breeding efforts owe much to the wealth of raw material provided by the plant exploration and introductions of the past century.

This bounty has yielded a prolific and rather continuous stream of crabapple cultivars. While in some genera, particularly roses, the release of a new cultivar does not always signal an improved or significantly "new" plant, many recent crabapple introductions offer benefits to both the gardener and the ecological health of the landscape. Indeed, crabapple breeders deserve praise, for although initially focused on flower color, annual bloom, and other ornamental traits, they have, in recent decades, responded to growing sentiment against the use of pesticides by developing forms with increased resistance to applescab, fireblight, and other diseases. Fiala's book describes these breeding efforts and resulting cultivars in encyclopedic fashion, offering information on their lineage, attributes, and weaknesses, as well as providing generous helpings of personal experience and opinion.

As Father Fiala recounts, the Arnold Arboretum and other botanic gardens figure prominently in the development of the modern
crabapple. While any discussion of crabapples in the United States would include mention of Arboretum horticulturist Donald Wyman, who did much to evaluate the performance of cultivars and popularize the plant, Fiala also gives special notice to the work of Charles Sargent, the Arboretum’s first director:

No horticultural institution did as much for introducing and discovering new species, varieties or special clones as did the Arnold Arboretum. Especially under Professor Charles Sargent, who took an active interest in crabapples, the Arnold Arboretum not only sought out new crabapple materials in Siberia and Japan, but it also energetically promoted any crabapple found in its gardens or elsewhere.

Arboretum contributions include the tea crab (Malus hupehensis), the Siebold crabapple (M. sieboldii), and Sargent’s crabapple (M. sargentii), which were collected by Sargent or his agents in Asia at the turn of the century. ‘Dorothea’, ‘Blanche Ames’, ‘Mary Potter’, and ‘Don Wyman’ are among the significant cultivars developed at the Arboretum by Karl Sax, Wyman, and others.

The publication of Fiala’s book gives occasion to revisit the progress of the Arnold Arboretum’s Malus collection. It is worth noting that the work of both Sargent and Wyman survives today in the Arboretum’s collection of over 170 crabapple species and varieties. The collection has been further enhanced by twenty years of systematic evaluation of disease resistance by the late Dr. Lester Nichols of Pennsylvania State University. More recently, the Arboretum’s Living Collections staff has modernized and updated the collection with 20 new cultivars that will be evaluated for disease resistance and landscape performance. Eventually, after sufficient trial and testing of the most promising varieties, the Arboretum will display the best crabapples for southern New England.

Fiala’s book would make a fine companion for a May trip to the Arboretum and is to be recommended to those with a serious interest in the group. Any controversies within crabapple circles over Fiala’s nomenclature overlook the larger value of this book as the chronicle of one of America’s preeminent horticulturists reflecting on a lifetime of dedicated involvement with one of our most important landscape plants.

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