

## Unusual Fruit Part Two

Last week we discussed the merits of the Juneberry, pawpaw and mulberry. Each of those unusual fruits offered a unique trait to the home gardener as do the fruits we will discuss this week. Although each tree or shrub is adaptable to our region, with another native in the mix, their popularity has yet to gain traction in our region. Diversifying fruits in your yard not only gives you more options for eating, but also allows you to extend your harvest season, ensures a harvest after frost or drought and can offer various benefits to wildlife. By diversifying, you're ensuring that no single weather event or pest could wipe out all of your crops. Keep your strawberries and pears, but mix in a few unusual fruits as well!

Persimmons are a commonly grown fruit in Asia but have yet to become established in the United States, although they are another Kansas native! Ripe persimmons are described as having a similar taste as an apricot with the flesh having a jelly-like texture. The American persimmon tolerates any well-drained soil. The trees prefer full sun and 10-15' to spread. The persimmon tree has a delicate root system and should be coddled the first few years of establishment. Persimmon trees drop fruit naturally but additional thinning may be required to achieve maximum fruit size and to avoid overloading the branches. When persimmons are ready to be harvested, clippers may be employed to separate the fruit from the tree. Fruit should be harvested when they are fully colored and firm. An unripe persimmon will have an extremely astringent flavoring.

Gooseberry shrubs produce pea sized to egg sized green, white, yellow, black, purple or red fruits. These fruits are often compared in flavor to grapes, but are more often said to have a flavor unique unto its own. A European fruit, gooseberry plants were brought to the United States in early colonial days. The plants are cold-hardy but do prefer cooler moist summers that Kansas does not frequently provide. Bushes often bear fruit within a year of planting and if properly cared for, can live 30 years or more. Gooseberry plants can tolerate a variety of well-drained soils and only desire a moderate amount of nitrogen. Plants should be spaced 6' apart as they can grow together and create a difficult to harvest hedge. A single bush can produce 8-10 pounds of fruit per year. A leather glove on one hand is necessary for harvest as the plant contains thorns.

An Asian native, Nanking cherries are an adaptable shrub that will tolerate nearly any location that provides sun and well-drained soil. Unlike many fruits, the Nanking cherry is extremely cold tolerant and can also endure late frosts. Newly planted shrubs need frequent watering, especially in summer heat. Plants that are 4-5 years old still benefit from a 1-2 times weekly deep soak. These shrubs require little pruning and should be spaced 6-10' for a hedge or 8-15' for stand along plants. As a hedge, this shrub can serve as food for wildlife on one side and food for people on the other. Deer and birds both like the Nanking cherry. Although Nanking cherries don't begin producing fruit until at least year 3, they can produce up to 50 pounds of fruit every year. Once harvested, fruit should be eaten as soon as possible as the shelf life of the Nanking cherry is poor. These dark red fruits are most often used for jams and pies but have also been used for syrups and wines.

The Jujube tree produces extremely sweet fruit that ranges in size from a cherry to a plum. Originating from China, this tree typically grows less than 30' tall with beautiful drooping branches. Temperatures that the tree can tolerate range from negative 20 degrees F to 120 degrees. The tree especially favors hot temperatures. Jujube's are also adaptable in their soil preferences. Compacted soils, dry soils, waterlogged soils—the jujube adapts to many climates and soil types. Typically, the jujube blooms late enough to avoid frost concerns. One thing to avoid with the jujube is digging around the tree. The major

downside to the jujube tree is that it sends up suckers, small trees that develop from its roots. Any damage to the roots, through digging or cultivation, can encourage this behavior. Harvest of the jujube fruit offers gardeners a couple of taste options. When fruit skin turns mahogany and is shiny and smooth it is ready to eat. At this stage the flesh is light green, crisp and sweet, not unlike an apple. If left on the tree, the fruit skin will wrinkle and the flesh will turn beige. At this stage the flesh has a spongy consistency and takes on more date-like characteristics.

Whether you prefer the apricot-like persimmon or the multiple flavors of the jujube, these unusual fruits all bring something to your garden that our more traditional fruits lack. Everyone on your block may have an apple tree but you can be the first to enjoy one of these unusual, and enchanting fruits!