

More Minor Fruits

You likely won't find the fruits discussed next in the grocery store. That's because, for one reason or another, they aren't suited to commercial production and marketing. About the only way you'll enjoy their unique flavors is to grow them yourself. As a bonus, many of these trees and bushes make fine landscape plants.

Persimmons

Diospyros virginiana

This attractive tree can grow up to 30 feet tall. Persimmons are more common in the South but are hardy in Zones 4 to 9. They require full sun and well-drained soil for optimum growth.

Persimmon trees have a pendulous branching habit and a narrow, somewhat rounded shape. The leaves are shiny and dark green and the flowers are greenish yellow. Most trees are either male or female, so plant several trees to ensure pollination.

Persimmon fruits range from 3/4 to 2 inches in diameter. They are pale yellow to deep orange with reddish cheeks. Unripe, the fruits are extremely astringent. When fully ripe, they are soft, nearly free of astringency, and have a mild flavor.

The fruits also are highly ornamental and remain on the tree for a long time after the leaves fall. Frost is not necessary to ripen the fruit and will ruin immature fruit. In colder regions, the season is not long enough to ripen many of the late cultivars, so choose only early-ripening ones.

Persimmon trees have a bark with an interesting texture and attractive fall foliage, making them a good accent plant in landscaping. They're also well suited to espalier training.

Growing Persimmons

In addition to full sun and well-drained soil, persimmons require a soil that has adequate fertility, but it need not be extremely rich. Some gardeners have found that excessive nitrogen can cause fruit drop. Trees are drought resistant but benefit from deep watering during extremely dry weather.

Begin training trees early to four to five main stems to produce an attractive structure. They should require little maintenance beyond that, and plants typically are not very prone to pests and diseases.

American types are hardier and better adapted to cold climates than Asian types. But they still benefit from planting in somewhat protected locations and perform best in milder parts of New York State. Cultivars include:

- **Garretson**—a superior cultivar for northern areas. Blooms are heavy and the fruit ripens in early October. The fruit, about 1 1/2 inches in diameter, is light orange with a reddish blush and it has tender skin and soft flesh.
- **John Rick**—produces larger, more attractive fruit than Garretson.
- **Early Golden**—not as productive as some of the other cultivars, but fruit is of good quality.
- **Hicks and Juhl**—perform well but are not as good as Garretson.

See also California Rare Fruit Growers at www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/persimmon.html

Pawpaws

Asimina triloba

Pawpaws are small deciduous trees that are hardy in Zones 5 to 8 and usually grow 15 to 20 feet tall (up to 40 feet under ideal conditions). They are attractive, with large showy leaves and a pyramidal shape. Sometimes suckers form, creating a pawpaw thicket. Like persimmon trees, they are more commonly grown in the South.

Pawpaw flowers are maroon and inconspicuous, about 1 1/2 inches across, and appear in late May before the leaves expand. Depending on pollination, trees bear clusters of one to six fruits. The fruits are usually 4 to 6 inches long with thin green skin and whitish flesh.

Two unrelated pawpaws are required for successful pollination. Hand pollination can increase fruiting because bees show little interest in the flowers. Flies can pollinate pawpaw flowers, so some growers hang pieces of rotting meat from the plants to attract them.

When ripe, the fruits turn yellowish black, resembling overripe bananas in looks and texture and somewhat in flavor. The flesh is rich and sweet with a custard consistency, has a very distinctive flavor, and has many dark brown seeds about the size of lima beans. The fruits ripen from mid-September until frost. They are very perishable and too fragile for commercial handling. While usually eaten fresh, some gardeners dry or freeze them.

Growing Pawpaws

Pawpaws prefer full sun and fertile, moist but well-drained soil. They are difficult to transplant and should be moved to their final location while still small. Keep them weed-free, especially as they are getting established. They

are not as cold hardy or drought tolerant as persimmons. Water plants deeply during dry periods.

Insect pests and diseases are seldom a problem. The principal maintenance concern is removing suckers. If you want a single-stemmed plant, remove all the suckers as they appear. If you prefer a hedge or screen of pawpaw plants, allow them to grow. Suckering diminishes as the tree ages.

Some cultivars for New York home gardens include Davis, Sunflower, Taylor, and Taytwo. Seedlings are interesting to grow because of the variable fruit size and quality. Fruit from seedlings may fail to ripen before frost. You can harvest fruit before frost and allow it to ripen indoors. Select only dark-fleshed cultivars because white-fleshed fruit may be bitter.

See also:

California Rare Fruit Growers at www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/pawpaw.html

Kentucky State University Pawpaw Planting Guide at www.pawpaw.kysu.edu/pawpaw/ppg.html

Mulberries

Morus spp.

Mulberry trees are as ornamental as they are fruitful. The mulberry was once considered the “king of the tree crops.” But its weedy invasiveness and soft fruit caused it to fall out of favor.

Mulberry flowers are small and inconspicuous. The fruits are numerous and resemble slender blackberries. They do not ripen all at once, but when they are ready they drop from the tree. They can be gathered by covering the ground with a sheet or canvas and shaking the tree. The fruits are used for jelly, wine, and desserts. The fruits also attract birds in large numbers and can be messy, making the tree unsuitable for public spaces. Plant mulberries to draw birds away from the fruit crops.

Growing Mulberries

Mulberries are generally hardy in Zones 4 or 5 to 8. They perform best in full sun and good soils—but will tolerate part shade—and do surprisingly well on a wide range of adverse soil conditions, including thin, gravelly soil; rocky slopes; dry, wet, or alkaline soils; and other difficult areas. This makes them well adapted for erosion control. They are easy to transplant and salt tolerant and produce fruit reliably in frost pockets and exposed areas.

Three species are commonly grown in the Northeast:

Black mulberries (*M. nigra*) produce the most flavorful fruit but are only adapted to the mildest parts of New York State (Zone 6 and warmer). They are native to western Asia.

Plant mulberries to draw birds away from other fruit crops.

Red mulberries (*M. rubra*) are hardier than black mulberries and may grow to become very large trees. These North American natives prefer deep, rich soils and are usually found on bottom lands and along streams. Young trees are not as hardy as older ones. Superior red mulberry selections include Hicks Everbearing, Johnson, Stubbs, Townsend, Illinois Everbearing, and Travis.

White mulberries (*M. alba*) are the most widely grown in New York State. Many cultivars have been selected for their foliage for silkworms (this species was originally imported from China to feed silkworms); several also have excellent fruit. New American is considered the best, but Trowbridge, Thorburn, and Victoria are very good. There is little cultivar development today. Seedlings are very variable in performance.

See also California Rare Fruit Growers at www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/mulberry.html

Juneberries

Amelanchier spp.

More than 25 species of Juneberries—also known as shadbush, Alleghany serviceberry, sugar pear, and Saskatoon—are native to North America. The fruit is technically a pome (like an apple), not a berry. These small trees grow up to 25 feet tall and are very attractive, with plentiful white flowers that bloom in late April to early May, usually showing before the fine-textured leaves fully develop. Juneberries have attractive gray bark, an upright branching habit that becomes horizontal with age, and showy red fall foliage. Use a dark background to emphasize these fine landscaping qualities.

The fruits are 1/4 to 3/8 inch in diameter and fleshy red, turning purplish blue to black. They are juicy with a mild flavor, ripening in late June. Birds are fond of Juneberries. Native Americans and early settlers gathered them and dried them for winter use. Juneberries are commonly used in pies and preserves, and lemon enhances their flavor.

Growing Juneberries

Most Juneberries are hardy in Zones 3 to 9 (some are hardy in Zone 2) and grow well throughout most of New York State. They prefer full sun and acidic, moist, well-drained soil, but they will tolerate shade and a wide range of soil types. Red spider mites are an occasional pest problem on dry sites, and Juneberries are susceptible to common apple pests.

Naturalistic sites are ideal for Juneberries. They are difficult to train to a single stem. You can remove suckers to train to a single-stemmed small tree or leave them for a multistemmed shrubby effect. Otherwise, they require little or no pruning.

Shannon and Indian are very productive cultivars with large fruit. Smoky and Pembina have the best flavor. Success and Dwarf Mountain are common older cultivars.

Highbush Cranberries

Viburnum trilobum, *Viburnum opulus* var. *americana*

Highbush cranberries (also known as American cranberry bush) are in the same family as elderberries. The size and color of the fruit are the only characteristics this species has in common with commercial cranberries.

Bushes grow to 15 feet tall and become rather formal and rounded in shape. They make a great hedge or privacy screen. The flowers are very small and white and are borne in large terminal cymes that are 3 to 4 inches across, similar to other ornamental viburnums. The fruits are 3/8 inch in diameter, showy red, and very persistent, remaining on the bushes well after frost and brightening the winter landscape. Harvest the fruits in late summer or fall to avoid astringency. Freezing and thawing softens the fruits, which are seldom eaten by birds. Use the fruits in jelly, preserves, or sauces.

Growing Highbush Cranberries

Highbush cranberries are very winter hardy and grow well in Zones 2 to 7. They are easy to transplant, grow in both sun and partial shade, and perform well on a wide range of soils. They tend to decline if subjected to too much moisture stress.

Bushes require pruning only when they become overgrown. Make thinning cuts to remove larger, older stems at the base, and remove broken branches. Pests are usually not a problem. However, the bushes are among the viburnum species that are most susceptible to the viburnum leaf beetle, which has recently spread across most of New York State.

Most highbush cranberries are sold simply as the species, but some cultivars are available. Wentworth, Andrews, and Hahs were selected for their high-quality fruit.

Viburnum opulus, the European cranberry bush, is similar in appearance but has astringent fruits with large seeds and high acidity and is plagued by aphids. If you intend to eat the fruit, make sure that you only grow the American species.

Cornelian Cherries

Cornus mas

Cornelian cherry is the only species of dogwood that produces edible fruit. It is a small, upright to spreading, 15- to 20-foot-tall tree that bears small yellow flowers very early—in late winter or early spring, before leaves develop. Flower buds are conspicuous and attractive in the winter, and the bark is flaky, exfoliating, and gray brown to brown. Foliage turns purplish red in the fall.

The fruits, about the size and shape of a medium-sized olive, ripen to a dark reddish maroon in late summer. They are delightful in jellies, tarts, and

sweetmeats and also are used to flavor sherbets and distilled spirits. Fruits contain twice the vitamin C by weight as oranges.

Growing Cornelian Cherries

Cornelian cherries are hardy in Zones 5 to 8. They grow in full sun and partial shade and prefer fertile, well-drained soils but tolerate a wide range of soil types. They are easy to transplant when young but take a while to get established. Cornelian cherries tend to be multistemmed with branches to the ground, but they can be pruned and trained into single-stemmed trees. This tree is one of the few small landscape trees with edible fruit that you can plant in shady areas under large trees. Plants are usually pest-free.

Cultivars include Aureo-elegantissima, which has creamy-white variegated leaves; Flava, which has yellow fruits that are larger and sweeter than the other species; and Golden Glory, which has upright branching and bears large, abundant flowers and large red fruit.

Beach Plums

Prunus maritima

Beach plums are stone fruits, related to other plums, cherries, and peaches. They are native shrubs common to coastal sand dunes from Maryland to southern Maine. Plants grow 4 to 10 feet tall and produce a profusion of white or pink flowers in mid-May, later than most other stone fruits.

The 1/2- to 1-inch diameter fruits ripen in late summer and are generally reddish to deep purple with a waxy bloom. They are quite acid with a crisp, tart, juicy flesh and a cherry-like pit and can be substituted for cherries or plums in recipes. Mostly wild-gathered fruits are used to make jams and jellies, which are often sold in resort areas along the coast.

Plants are often quite thorny and can be used as a low-growing hedge. Seaside plantings become gnarled and picturesque with age. The foliage is attractive, and the bark is dark and shiny.

Growing Beach Plums

Grow beach plums as you would other stone fruit. While found almost exclusively on sandy soils in the wild, beach plums will tolerate heavier soils if they have good drainage. They require full sun and are hardy in Zones 3 to 7. Beach plums are popular for erosion control and seaside plantings because they tolerate sandy soil and salt spray. Tent caterpillars and brown rot are occasionally troublesome, and birds especially enjoy these fruits.

Cultivars are not easy to come by. Autum has a spreading, low-growing habit and produces a large annual crop with good-size, high-quality fruit. Stearns is a good ornamental with fruit that processes well. Northneck and Squibnocket are recommended as ornamentals and soil binders.

Cornell researchers are working with growers to revitalize the once-vibrant beach plum industry. For more information, see www.beachplum.cornell.edu.

Other lesser-known *Prunus* species include:

Western sand cherries (*Prunus besseyi*)—small, spreading shrubs that grow up to 4 feet tall and are hardy in Zones 3 to 6. This cultivar bears 1/2-inch white flowers in late April or early May that ripen into 3/4-inch purple-black fruits in late summer. The fruit is astringent but sweet and used in jellies or jams and in combination with apples in pies. Plants are native to the Great Plains and very tolerant of dry, sandy soils.

Nanking cherries (*Prunus tomentosa*)—an attractive, dense shrub from China that grows 6 to 10 feet tall and spreads to 15 feet. Also known as Manchu cherry, this species bears fragrant white flowers very early in the spring, which ripen into bright red fruit about half the size of a sour cherry. The fruits are covered with inconspicuous hairs and are juicy and slightly acid. Plants are very winter hardy and grow in Zones 2 to 7.

Buffaloberries

Shepherdia argentea

Also known as the silver buffaloberry, this thorny shrub or 6- to 10-foot-tall tree has an overall silvery or whitened appearance. The leaves are narrow and silvery white on both sides, and the flowers are very small and yellow and are borne on small branches. The scarlet to yellow fruits are borne in small clusters and vary in size from that of a currant to a small gooseberry. They ripen in July and may remain on the bushes until frost or later. Its silvery appearance and attractive fruit make this plant a pleasing ornamental.

Early settlers served the berries as a sauce with buffalo meat. They can be dried and stored or used in jellies, sauces, and preserves. Their agreeable flavor lends well to out-of-hand eating, but harvest is difficult due to the 1- to 2-inch thorns. Like legumes, these plants fix nitrogen from the atmosphere.

Growing Buffaloberries

Plant buffaloberries in sites with full sun but cool northern exposures to delay flowering and avoid damage to flower buds by late spring frosts. Otherwise, the plant is very hardy, growing in Zones 3 to 7. While buffaloberries prefer moist, well-drained soil, they tolerate poor dry soils and a high pH quite well. Plants are slow growing.

To ensure successful pollination, plant both male and female plants. Male flowers are sessile (stalkless) and clustered at the nodes. Female flowers are smaller and more slender with stalked buds arranged in less compact clusters.

Birds enjoy buffaloberries. If any fruit remains after frost and bird feeding, they can be gathered anytime during the winter.

A related species, the russet buffaloberry (*Shepherdia canadensis*) is thornless but has bitter, sour berries.

Quinces

Cydonia oblonga

Quinces are small, irregularly shaped trees that grow to about 15 feet tall. They often are used as rootstock for dwarf pears. The trees bear white or pink showy flowers at the ends of leafy shoots in the spring. The flowers are susceptible to winter injury at temperatures below about -15 degrees F, but trees are hardy in Zones 5 to 9. As they mature, the trees take on an unusual gnarled form.

The foliage is deep green with a fine soft fuzz underneath and turns yellow in the fall. The fruits are very fragrant and are commonly used to make jelly. Harvest them when they are golden yellow. Quince is a good source of pectin.

Don't confuse these quinces with several other quince-like species grown for ornamental purposes. There are many varieties of Japanese quince (*Chaenomeles japonica*) and common flowering quince (*C. speciosa*, *C. lagenaria*)—attractive shrubs bearing showy pink, red, or orange flowers in early spring but most producing fruits that are hard and nearly inedible. These fruits do, however, have a high pectin content and are occasionally mixed with other fruits in jellies and preserves.

Growing Quinces

Quinces prefer a fertile site in full sun. They are slightly more tolerant of wet soils and drought than apples and will fruit more reliably on moist but well-drained soil. Cross-pollination is needed for good fruiting. Plant quinces in a protected area because they respond poorly to rapid changes in temperature and exposure.

Although quinces were once grown extensively in New York, pest problems limit their use today. Flower bud injury, fire blight, borers, codling moth, curculio, scale, and tent caterpillars all can cause problems. To avoid fire blight, do not use excessive nitrogen and keep pruning to a minimum. Thin out suckers in winter or early spring. Although quinces are attractive and have interesting fruit, an aggressive maintenance program may be needed if you use these plants extensively in your landscape.

The cultivars Angers, Orange, Pineapple, Champion, and Smyrna are generally available.