Throughout the winter, many cultivars of crabapple trees including *Malus* x 'Red Jade' and *Malus* x 'Prairiefire’ can be easily identified by their branches bursting with small, bright red fruit. Beside adding color to a stark landscape, the fruit provides an important source of food to birds. When they bloom in late April or early May, crabapples are a crucial species for pollinators, as their early blossoms and month-long flowering season help to sustain bees. When they are in bloom, crabapple trees are effective for pollinating any variety of apple tree within fifty feet. In fact, orchardists used to take their blossoming branches and put them in a bucket of water in the middle of their apple orchards so that bees would visit the crabapple blossoms and then visit the apple blossoms as they opened on the apple trees, improving the fruit set.

There are numerous species with the genus *Malus*, and not all of them have winter fruit. The definition encompasses all wild apples, which are much smaller than those grown commercially and named based on their pinching, sour taste. While wild apples are believed to have originated in Kazakhstan and then spread throughout the Mediterranean and Europe, there are a number of varieties indigenous to North America, including *malus angustifolia* (narrow-leafed crab apple), *malus coronaria* (prairie crab apple), and *malus ioensis* (Iowa crab apple). These were particularly beloved by Henry David Thoreau, who wrote at length about them in his 1862 essay *Wild Apples*, noting that some fruits were “sour enough to set a squirrel's teeth on edge and make a jay scream.”

While some fruits are incredibly tart, they are not toxic aside from the seeds. Crabapple fruits ripen in late summer or early fall and can be prepared and eaten in sauces and ciders. With their natural pectin content, they are also well-suited to use in jellies and jams. Aside from their culinary uses, the vase-shaped crabapple trees make good additions to gardens as a compact ornamental tree that rarely grows taller than twenty feet in height. Although both crabapple and apple trees are susceptible to apple scab, cultivars tend to be more disease-resistant and make good street trees.

For more information on this species, please contact trees@openlands.org.