

Chapter 4. Less Commonly Grown Fruits

Minor fruits, such as quince, persimmon, and pawpaw, are sometimes grown by homeowners who are interested in unusual or hard-to-obtain fruits. Some of these are native to Ohio and surrounding areas, though more fruits of foreign origin (yet suitable for midwest conditions) are becoming available through commercial nurseries. Several of the fruits listed here have attractive blossoms or foliage as well as edible fruit, making them good multi-purpose plants as part of an edible landscape. They also tend to be good for wildlife plantings. Whether gardeners have a large open field or just a few extra square feet, planting some of these lesser grown fruits can be fun and possibly add a new experience to a gardener's palate.

Pawpaw

A native plant, the pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) was known to Native Americans and early explorers alike. The pawpaw flower is dark lavender to purple-red and is very attractive upon close inspection, hanging like a little hat in mid-spring. Pawpaws are sometimes referred to as the custard apple or poor-man's banana.



Figure 103. Pawpaw flower.

Photo courtesy of the Ohio State University Extension Nursery, Landscape, and Turf Team.

The nutritious fruit produced by this tree ripens from mid September till frost and varies somewhat in flavor and size among the different cultivars. Most commonly the flavor is described as banana-like or even like a combination of banana, mango, and pineapple. The fruit is normally three to six

inches in length (the largest fruit of any native fruit tree) and has large seeds surrounded by the edible custard-like pulp. The skin is not edible.

The fruit may be used in making breads, pies, puddings, cookies, ice cream, or simply eaten out of hand. The pulp also freezes well so it can be used at a later time.



Figure 104. Pawpaw fruit.

Photo by Scott Bauer, USDA/ARS. Used with permission.

The large leaves of this pyramidal-shaped tree also make it desirable as a landscape plant. By removing the suckers that will grow from the root system in the first few years of growth, the pawpaw can be grown as a tree, or the suckers can be left to grow, resulting in a hedge or thicket of pawpaw plants. A seedling may take as long as six to eight years before producing fruit, and two unrelated pawpaws are required for pollination.

Because pawpaws do not transplant well, potted plants tend to establish better than bare-root, field-dug seedlings. Grafted cultivars are also more likely to remain true to strain than are seedlings. The pawpaw can be grown in full sun or partial shade and does best in moist but well-drained soils. Aside from picnic beetles, raccoons, deer, and other wildlife that enjoy feeding on the ripe fruit, the pawpaw is considered to be pest free.

Because the pawpaw has a short shelf life (two to three days at room temperature or no more than three weeks in the refrigerator), fruit do not ship well. It is likely that you will only be able to enjoy the flavor of this native fruit if you grow it yourself.

More information on growing pawpaws and research associated with them can be found at this Kentucky State University web site: <http://www.pawpaw.kysu.edu>.

Persimmon

The American persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*) is native to the southern two-thirds of the eastern United States, with an east-west line across central Ohio representing the northernmost limit of its native range (though it can be planted much further north in terms of cold hardiness). The fruit of this species is very astringent (due to tannin content) until it is fully ripe, when the fruit develops a sweet, mild, unique flavor. These one to one-and-one-half-inch fruits may be eaten fresh, in fruit salads, or used in making sauces, preserves, baked items, and many other culinary delights. The fruits can be ripened on or off the tree. However, since they bruise easily when ripe, they are often picked when fully colored, yet still firm, and allowed to ripen off the tree.

Though most cultivars of American persimmon will need both a male and a female plant for proper pollination, Meader is one cultivar that is reliably self-fruitful. The tree will get as large as 50 feet tall and 30 feet wide.



Figure 105. American persimmon.
Photo courtesy of Hugh Wilson, Texas A&M University. Used with permission.



Figure 106. A fully ripe or overripe persimmon is very sweet and delicious.
Photo courtesy of Andrew Boose, Metro Parks (Columbus and Franklin County Metropolitan Park District), Columbus, Ohio. Used with permission.

The Asian and Japanese persimmons have a larger fruit than the American cultivars but are generally not hardy enough to be grown in Ohio. However,

there are now Asian-American hybrids that combine the hardiness of the American persimmon with the larger fruit size (up to 2-1/2 inches) of the Asian persimmon. Two of these hybrid cultivars 'Russian Beauty' and 'Nikita's Gift' are also said to be self-fertile.

Persimmons have few pest problems and are adapted to a wide variety of soil conditions. They can tolerate some shade but will grow best in full sun. Persimmons are often trained to an open center system with three to four scaffold branches early in their growth, with little maintenance being required after that. They will fruit (usually in October) two to three years after planting and can be expected to live for 50 to 75 years.

Quince

The quince (*Cydonia oblonga*), a member of the apple and pear family, is native to the Middle East. The fruit of most cultivars is too hard and sour to eat raw and therefore is used primarily for making preserves or sometimes is added to apple cider. However, there are a few cultivars, such as 'Aromatnaya' and 'Kaunching,' that are sweet enough to be eaten fresh.



Figure 107. Quince fruit.
Photo Courtesy of Dr. Mark Rieger, University of Georgia. Used with permission.

The fruit grows on a large bush or a small tree that requires little maintenance outside of removing dead branches and making occasional thinning cuts to encourage new shoot growth. It is also considered to be self-fertile, therefore needing only one plant to produce a crop. The quince tends to be susceptible to fire blight and codling moth injury.

Flowering quince (*Chaenomeles*) produces fruit that are usable as well, but they are generally smaller and of lower quality than are true quince.

Quince grows best in soils that are deep, well drained, and loamy, though it is able to tolerate wet soils better than many other fruits. The fruit, which is picked and allowed to ripen off the tree, normally ripens in late September and October. Some quince cultivars are available in the market now (Table 22).

Table 22. List of Recommended Quince Cultivars.		
Uses: Preserves, jams, and jellies.		
Cultivar	Season	Remarks
Orange	September	Good quality
Pineapple	September	Good quality
Champion	November	Cold hardy

Mulberry

Considered by some to be an undesirable weed tree, the mulberry tree (*Morus*) can produce an abundant crop of fruit that somewhat resembles raspberries. The American or red mulberry is native to the eastern United States, with the white and black mulberries being native to Asia. Mulberries can be used for jellies, dessert toppings, or pies as well as to make wine. In general, the black mulberry is not hardy enough for Ohio conditions. White mulberries may be preferred if planting near the house or patio, as the fruits do not stain surfaces as do the other types.

Several trees are needed to provide the cross-pollination needed to ensure fruit set. Mulberries will grow well in droughty or poor soil, but they require full sun and plenty of space (at least 15 feet between trees). Mulberries are considered to be nearly pest free and require little maintenance other than removing broken or crowded branches.



Figure 108. Mulberry.
Photo courtesy of Larry Allain, National Wetland Research Center, USGS. Used with permission.



Figure 109. Close-up of a mulberry fruit.
Photo courtesy of Hugh Wilson, Texas A&M University. Used with permission.

Medlar

The medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) is native to the eastern Mediterranean area and has been grown in Europe for centuries. Considered to be related to the pear, these self-fertile trees grow to a height of about 10 to 20 feet and produce one-inch diameter fruit that is picked after a hard frost. The fruit must be ripened, a process called *bletting*, after picking before they are edible. They can be kept in a cool area for several months. The flavor of the fruit is said to be like a rich, cinnamon applesauce. The fruit can be eaten raw or made into jelly. The variety ‘Nottingham’ is said to produce the best quality fruit. Medlars will also add to the landscape as they bloom in late spring with large white flowers that fade to pink.



Figure 110. Medlar fruits.
Photo courtesy of Dr. Richard J. Naskali, University of Idaho. Used with permission.

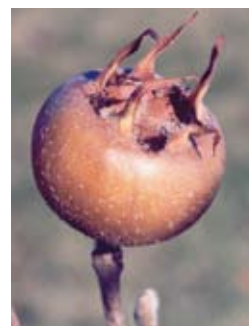


Figure 111. Closeup of a medlar fruit.
Photo courtesy of Dr. Richard J. Naskali, University of Idaho. Used with permission.

Juneberry

The Juneberry (*Amelanchier alnifornia*), also called shad-bush, Saskatoon (Canada), or serviceberry, is native to North America and was collected by Native Americans as well as early settlers. The fruit is a 1/4- to 1/2-inch berry that resembles blueberries both in appearance and flavor. The seeds also have somewhat of an almond flavor. They are very winter hardy and can grow in any soil except for poorly drained soils. The plant can be grown as a bush, which increases the fruiting potential, or trained to grow like a tree. The Juneberry is self-fruitful, though planting several cultivars is said to increase production.

Several of the available cultivars include 'Shannon' and 'Indian,' which are very productive cultivars with larger fruit, and 'Smoky' and 'Pembina,' which are reported to have the best flavor. With showy white blossoms in May, this plant may also be desirable for landscaping purposes.

The fruit is ready to pick in late June and can be used for pies, preserves, or eaten fresh. Some consider the Juneberry to be a good substitute for blueberries since an acid soil is not required for good growth. Spider mites can sometimes be a problem in dry situations.



Figure 112. Young developing fruits of Juneberry (also called Saskatoon or serviceberry.)

Photo courtesy of J. S. Peterson, USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database. Used with permission.



Figure 113. Mature fruits of Juneberry.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Volodymyr M. Mezhenykyj, Artemivsk Nursery Experimental Station, Institute of Horticulture of UAAS, Ukraine. Used with permission.

Bush Cherries

Bush cherries consist of several species, including the Nanking Cherry (*Prunus tomentosa*) and Hansens Bush Cherry (*Prunus besseyi*), and are native to Asia. They are considered very cold hardy. These bushes grow six to 10 feet in height and have an abundance of white to pinkish flowers, making them a good multipurpose shrub.

The cherries produced by these shrubs are slightly more tart and have a slightly larger pit than do tree-grown sour cherries, making them more desirable for pies and preserves than eating out of hand. They will usually start to fruit the second year after planting. They require full sun, do best in a loamy soil, and are considered to be self-fruiting.



Figure 114. Nanking Cherry.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Richard J. Naskali, University of Idaho. Used with permission.

Cornelian Cherries

Cornelian cherries (*Cornus mas*) are actually a member of the dogwood family and have an edible fruit. The fruits ripen in late summer and are similar in taste to tart cherries and can be used for jellies, pies, or eaten fresh and are very high in vitamin C. An early flowering plant that can be trained as a tree or shrub, Cornelian cherry grows well in most soils, though it does best in fertile, well-drained soils with full sun or light shade. It is considered to be pest free.



Figure 115. Cornelian cherries.
Photo courtesy of the Ohio State University Extension Nursery, Landscape, and Turf Team. Used with permission.

Hardy Kiwi

Hardy kiwi, also known as arctic kiwi or Chinese gooseberry, is a member of the Actinidia family and native to northern China, Siberia, Japan, and Korea. This family of plants also includes the commercially available kiwi fruit, which cannot be grown under Ohio conditions. Those kiwi that are able to be grown in Ohio include *Actinidia kolomikta*, sometimes called ‘Arctic Beauty Kiwi,’ and *Actinidia arguta*, which is often listed as ‘Hardy Kiwi.’ Of these species, *A. kolomikta* is considered to be hardier, with the plant (though not necessarily the fruit buds) being able to survive temperatures as low as -40°F.

Though hardy kiwis have not proved to be successful in commercial plantings in Ohio, with care, they have been successful for backyard fruit growers. Fruit produced by these hardier species is cherry to grape size, sweeter and without the fuzz of the commercially grown species, and can be used for pies and jams or simply eaten fresh. Though it may take five to seven years before they begin to fruit, the vines have been known to survive for 50 years or more. Depending on cultivar, the fruit begins to ripen in mid August, continuing into September.



Figure 116. Hardy kiwi.
Photo courtesy of Dr. Richard J. Naskali, University of Idaho. Used with permission.



Figure 117. Ripe fruits of hardy kiwi on a vine in a well-protected area.

With either species of kiwi, male and female flowers are produced on separate plants. Therefore, both male and female plants are necessary for fruit production. An exception to this rule, the Issai cultivar of *A. arguta* is said to be self-fruitful, but produces larger fruit when a male plant is available for pollination. The vines will need a sturdy trellis to grow on.

Growers as far north as Minnesota have successfully grown hardy kiwi by using a trellis that is able to be lowered to the ground for the winter. This allows the vines to be mulched and protected from winter temperatures. In the spring, the trellis is returned to its upright position. The kiwis will grow best in well-drained soils in areas protected from heavy winds. Possible pest problems include root rots (if planted in too wet an area), spider mites, and Japanese beetles.

For more information on growing kiwi, consult Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet HYG 1426 *Kiwifruit and Hardy Kiwi*, or the Minnesota Extension Yard and Garden Brief *Growing Kiwi in Minnesota*.

Highbush Cranberry

Though the fruit resembles the cranberry in both appearance and flavor, the Highbush Cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum* or *Viburnum opulus* var. *americana*) is actually a member of the honeysuckle family. It is a cold-hardy Native American shrub that grows to a height of six to 10 feet, making it also useful for hedges or privacy screens. The fruit, harvested in late summer or fall, is used in jellies, preserves, or sauces.

The cultivars ‘Wentworth,’ ‘Andrews,’ and ‘Hahs’ are specifically noted for their fruit qualities. The Highbush Cranberry will grow well in most soils in full sun or partial shade and has few pests.

Note: This plant should not be confused with the European cranberry bush (*Viburnum opulus*), which has more astringent fruit with large seeds.



Figure 118. Highbush cranberry fruits.
Photo courtesy of the Ohio State University Extension Nursery, Landscape, and Turf Team. Used with permission.

Ground Cherries

An annual plant rather than a perennial, the ground cherry (*Physalis peruviana*) is a member of the tomato family. Ground cherries are also referred to as strawberry tomatoes or husk tomatoes. The plants grow to a height of 18 to 24 inches and produce their fruit in a papery Chinese lantern-

type husk that drops to the ground as the fruit begins to ripen. The fruit is fully ripe when the berry inside the husk turns yellow. At this point it has a unique flavor that some people say resembles a mild orange-strawberry or even a pineapple flavor. It can be used in preserves, pies, and other baked goods or just eaten out of hand. If left in the husk, the fruit will keep for several weeks without refrigeration. The fruit are also well suited for freezing so that they can be used at a later time.

The seeds can be purchased from seed catalogs, but there are no standard varieties, and therefore the fruit may vary in size and flavor from one source to another. They can be started indoors to be transplanted after frost similar to tomatoes or sown directly in the garden after the frost-free date. Once established in an area, ground cherries often will continue to come up as volunteer plants each spring. The main pests are flea beetles with control rarely being needed.



Figure 119. Ground cherries, showing fruit inside the papery husk as well as the yellow fruit with the husk removed.