





Introduction

Perhaps there is no group of plants more beautiful and plainly functional than the perennial, edible fruits. In spring, blossoms and fragrances abound, and in the summer and fall, the fruits set on in all their array of colors and forms. These plants are just as useful for the home landscape as they are for the orchards that raise them and stock our grocery stores. Yet, most of us have had little (or no) opportunity to see these plants, and we would never know how attractive they really are. Therefore, it is with this impetus that the ISU Horticulture Center has recently designed and installed a garden completely dedicated to this fascinating and beautiful group of plants.

The following is a discussion of all the plants used in the fruit garden (see the design in the Appendix) and a few additional plants as well. Some of them will be very familiar, while others may be less common or completely brand-new. All of them, however, produce edible fruit, and are plants that could be considered for use in the home landscape.

Alpine Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*)

General: ROSE FAMILY. In name alone are the fruits of the alpine strawberry akin to the strawberries available at the grocery store. Smaller in size and more refined in flavor, these berries prove an irresistible treat for even the most stalwart gardener. And, unlike the short period of fruit set expected from regular strawberry plants, alpine strawberries produce berries throughout the summer, until winter's ways set in with frost.

After a trial season at the Horticulture Center, we found these plants to be well suited for any

kind of modern landscape use. The delicate clumps of light green foliage provide a subtle but graceful groundcover that could and should be used more often.

Origin: Alpine strawberries are native to every continent except Australia and Antarctica, and their natural haunt is along woodland borders.¹

North American residents have long held this plant close to heart—from the Iroquois tribes who ritually celebrated the first fruit of the season to the poets and botanists who put their pen to the page and described these delightful berries. William Butler, a European physician of yore, waxed poetically about wild strawberries saying, “Doubtless God could have made, but doubtless God never did make, a better berry.”²

Nutrition: Strawberries contain a high amount of vitamin C and a moderate amount of iron. Together, these nutrients are important for treating anemia and fatigue. Also, strawberries provide a type of fiber called pectin, which is important for lowering cholesterol and removing toxins.³

Form/Size: Plants grow from a single crown, forming a mound of foliage that somewhat conceals the abundant berry producing stems. For a solid ground cover, space the plants six inches apart; spacing 12 or more inches will result in separate mounds.⁴ Our plants grew to about 10 inches in height.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com) – called Fraises des Boise

Apple (*Malus sp.*)

General: ROSE FAMILY. Ubiquitous to any kitchen counter fruit basket, the sheer abundance of its fruit makes the apple tree an incredibly significant plant that must be included in our self-respecting fruit garden.

There are a copious amount of apple varieties on the market, and distinguishing between them without the use of a plant tag or the taste buds of a keen connoisseur is nearly impossible. Variety selection is based on numerous factors. Of course there is fruit flavor, but many companies are also developing miniature plants that are useful for tucking into the small confines of an urban backyard. Some inventive companies have even grafted branches of different varieties onto the same plant so that a gardener can get all of their favorites off one tree.

Origin: The apple tree is native to Turkistan, a region covering northeastern Afghanistan, western China, and Kazakhstan. Its journey to the United States is largely credited to James Cook, the famous explorer and cartographer who strongly advocated apples as a means of scurvy-prevention for sailors (a disease caused by vitamin C deficiency). Per his recommendation, apples were packed in barrels with dry sawdust and sand, and brought to the New World in the name of sailor sustenance.⁵

As for the apple's American history, we must not forget Johnny Appleseed, a.k.a. John Chapman. He truly was a real man, and he really did roam the New World planting apple seeds (although his endeavors are often colored in many tall, childhood tales). His travels can be easily traced throughout Pennsylvania and Ohio, but he may have covered an even larger area: as far west as Missouri, as far north as Wisconsin, and as far south as Virginia. Some of his beloved apple seeds might have even been planted right here in Illinois.⁶

Nutrition: As shown by Mr. Cook and his sailors,

apples are indeed a good source of vitamin C. They are also rich in pectin, the same cholesterol lowering and toxin eliminating fiber found in strawberries,⁷ and interestingly, the pectin is also helpful in keeping your teeth clean.⁸

Form/Size: Due to the dizzying array of varieties and selections on the market, it is very difficult to predict the size or the form of this plant. Let it simply stand that—within reason—whatever size you want, there is probably a plant selection available.

Suppliers:

1. We used a local garden center, but many mail-order nurseries are available.

Blackberry (*Rubus sp.*)

General: Blackberries need very little introduction. The black-stained mouth and fingers of adults and children alike, accompanied by a longing study of an empty fruit-bowl, is testament enough to the esteem at which these fruits are held.

As far as selecting a plant for your garden, there is an overwhelmingly large amount of blackberry varieties that are commercially available, generally differing due to the fruit size, fruit flavor, or the absence of thorns. Personally, I would prefer a plant with superior flavor over any of these other factors, but there is very little literature that bothers to provide such a taste assessment. Of course there are the companies selling these plants, but sometimes it's hard to trust the salesman to provide an accurate evaluation. Yet, that's about all there is. At the Horticulture Center, we decided to plant Apache, a thornless variety with supposedly great flavor—as soon as our plants begin producing, we'll have to decide if this is true.

Origin: Many species of blackberries are native to the United States, where they are powerful magnets for walkers and bikers along any given nature trail.

In the winter, these plants are easily confused with wild roses in the woods, and in fact they are a member of the same plant family: aptly referred to as the rose family (Rosaceae). Like the rose, whose thorns are always forgiven on account of their flowers, it does not take more than a fresh blackberry, plucked fresh from the plant, to forget the scratches on the hand inflicted by its battery of thorns.

Nutrition: Blackberries are rich in vitamin C, which helps protect against infections and cancers. Also, they are an excellent source of vitamin E, which is beneficial for the heart and circulatory system. In addition they contain the soluble fiber pectin, which helps to eliminate cholesterol, and protects against environmental toxins. They are a good source of potassium.⁹

Form/Size: The size is moderately variable, and some selections may tend to spread beyond their intended confines. Apache is supposed to have an upright form that won't spread like most others; it may grow up to four or five feet tall.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com)

Cranberry

(Vaccinium macrocarpon)

General: HEATH FAMILY. As soon as a fledgling fruit aficionado begins to take flight, and they can just see beyond the most common fruits of the Midwestern landscape, cranberries will almost certainly become an object of passion. Perhaps it is the nutrition, or perhaps it is the allure of growing this plant that we erroneously believe is only grown in sappy northern bogs. Whatever it is, when the cranberry bug bites it almost always bites hard.

Nonetheless, the bog concept is not completely without base. While the plants do not need to be grown in water, attention to the soil is very crucial.

The key factor is acidic soil (or low soil pH). Typical garden soil is not nearly acidic enough and will need to be amended with an acidifying organic material. The renowned cranberry expert Jennifer Trehane recommends removing about a foot of soil from the planting area and then building a raised bed that is about two feet high. The resulting space would be about three feet deep. This should be filled with acidic soil—accomplished by mixing the soil with sphagnum moss or another pH-lowering organic product.¹⁰ Specific details on this and similar methods can easily be found on the Internet or in books devoted to the subject. pH can then be measured with a pH testing kit.

Origin: Cranberries are native to the northern United States and Canada, typically finding their home in the swampy bog-like environments discussed earlier.¹¹ Illinois hosts a scattered distribution of these bogs, mostly in the northern reaches of our state, and those bitten by the cranberry bug will ultimately feel the northward call to discover these plants in their native (and bizarre) habitat. Perhaps the most well known location is Volo Bog in the northwest suburbs of Chicago.

Historically, North American settlers quickly learned the gastronomic value of cranberries from the Native Americans. The first documentation of the fruit was in 1614, and by the 1680's, settlers had already discovered the modern Thanksgiving combination of cranberry sauce and turkey. Such accolade was given this humble little fruit that in 1789, a New Jersey law was passed that forbade anyone pick cranberries before a designated date. Cranberries were a serious affair.¹²

Nutrition: Cranberries are a good source of polyphenols—compounds that act as antioxidants, cleaning up harmful toxins in our bodies. Polyphenols also have some antibacterial and antiviral properties, and help increase the effectiveness of vitamin C and vitamin E in our bodies. Direct results of these compounds include (but are not exclusive to) the prevention of age-related diseases, the slowing of aging effects, and the reduction of inflammation caused

by arthritis and other similar diseases.¹² Current research also confirms that a glass of cranberry juice effectively prevents urinary infections.¹³

Form/Size: Cranberries form a low, spreading mat of woody branches, about four inches tall.¹⁴ Pilgrim, the variety planted at the Horticulture Center, is supposed to spread about one foot per year. Plants should be spaced about two feet apart.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Company (www.hartmanns-plantcompany.com)
2. Cranberry Creations (www.cranberrycreations.com)

Gooseberry

(*Ribes uva-crispa* or *Ribes hirtellum*)

General: SAXIFRAGE FAMILY. Anyone who has had the opportunity to partake in a piece of gooseberry pie will be able to tell you—whether they enjoyed it or not—that there is nothing quite like a gooseberry. Proponents of the fruit will use it in just about anything: wine, desserts, meat sauces, and other culinary treats.¹⁵

Although not the same species, I have fond childhood memories of collecting native gooseberries (*Ribes missouriense*) in the woods, and bringing them back for my mom to bake into a luscious pie. Yes, I am a proponent of gooseberries. Simply be wary of the numerous, small thorns borne on these plants.

Origin: Gooseberries became very popular in eighteenth century England where cottage gardeners competed to see who could raise the largest gooseberry. Annual competitions were held in which there was much “gaiety of singing and refreshments...offset by the solemn weighing of the fruits.” Gooseberry clubs still compete today—only the once pea-sized fruits have now reached the appearance of a small apple!¹⁶

The northern gooseberry (*Ribes hirtellum*) is a North American native, and can be found scattered

throughout northern Illinois.¹⁷

Nutrition: Little nutritional information is readily available for gooseberries; however, they are known to be good source of fiber and vitamins A and C.¹⁸

Form/Size: Gooseberry plants form arching, densely-branched shrubs and should be spaced four to six feet apart to keep them from forming an impenetrable mass of thorny, interlaced twigs. Fruit and pruning expert, Lee Reich, recommends pruning the plants so that they have only one main trunk that branches about six inches off the ground.¹⁹ Based on my own observations, plants should not be expected to grow much taller than four feet.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com)
2. Stark Bro's (www.starkbros.com)

Hardy Arctic Kiwi

(*Actinidia kolomikta*)

General: KIWI FAMILY. Even if the hardy arctic kiwi did not produce fruit, you would still want to grow it as an ornamental vine. It is a fast grower that will quickly cover a trellis or arbor, and the flowers are fragrant, clematis-like blossoms. To simply add to the appeal, the fruit, albeit small, is quite edible and has the same tangy flavor as the large, grocery store kiwis (*Actinidia deliciosa*)—even the smooth, green skin is edible. Plus, as the name suggests, this plant is much hardier than its brown-skinned counterpart.²⁰

Plants may need a bit of shade, especially when young.²¹

Origin: The hardy arctic kiwi is native to the humid forests of eastern Asia, where the fruits have been collected from the wild and consumed for hundreds of years. Even today, though widely eaten and enjoyed, the people in its indigenous habitat rarely

cultivate kiwis outside of the wild.²²

In the early 1900's, when first imported to Europe and the United States, all the major kiwi species, including even the large-fruited grocery-store kiwi, were initially introduced as purely ornamental plants. Old estate gardens from this period have many fine displays of these species twining through their midst—while most visitors walk by without realizing the delicious treasures hidden beneath the foliage.²³ Everyone knows the benefits of stopping to smell the roses; perhaps there is a benefit to sticking our noses into some leaves as well.

Nutrition: For so long the term vitamin C has been nearly synonymous with oranges. Well, watch out old king, its time to abdicate the throne! Believe it or not, the hardy arctic kiwi is reported to have as much as 17 times the amount of vitamin C found in oranges.²⁴

Form/Size: This plant forms a robust, twining vine, six to ten feet high and four feet wide.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com)
2. Stark Bro's (www.starkbros.com)

Lingonberry

(Vaccinium vitis-idaea)

General: HEATH FAMILY. Lingonberries are a petite beauty. Hidden and unnoticed in most gardens and gastronomic pallets alike, this is a plant that can capture both the heart and the taste buds. The small mounds of glossy green foliage, combined with the miniature, white bell-shaped flowers, and the cranberry-like fruit, create a charming, elfin plant that would be a valuable asset to any garden. The flavor of the berries is also frequently compared to cranberries, but connoisseurs generally regard lingonberries as richer and less biting.²⁵ Both plants are closely related and similarities are expectable. In fact (and unfortu-

nately), one such commonality is the same stringent soil requirements discussed in the Cranberry section. Successfully growing these plants is quite difficult when the proper precautions are not taken—but surely it is worth the extra effort.

Origin: The lingonberry is native to Scandinavia where it has long been used in everything from baked goods to wine. It was once so popular in Iceland that a statute was necessitated to address its harvest. The law allowed a person to eat berries on a neighbor's property, so long as he didn't take anymore than he could eat on the spot.²⁶ Imagine anticipating your lingonberry crop, only to find your neighbor gorged and red-at-the-lips, eating the last berry from your patch. I suppose we should not underestimate the vast size of these wild communities.

Interesting, unlike its bog-loving relative, native lingonberries are just as happy on mountaintops and rocky, exposed cliffs. They will tolerate bog-like environments, but drier conditions like these and grass moorlands are preferred.

Nutrition: Lingonberry nutrition is quite similar to cranberries, and polyphenols are the most noteworthy attribute. See the Cranberry section for a complete discussion of the value obtained from these compounds. Vitamin C content is also quite respectable.²⁷

Native American tribes used lingonberries and lingonberry juices to treat coughs and colds.²⁸

Form/Size: This is a low groundcover that may spread 3 or more feet, getting no taller than 8 inches.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com)
2. St. Lawrence Nursery (www.sln.potsdam.ny.us)
3. One Green World (www.onegreenworld.com)
4. Raintree Nursery (raintreenursery.com)

Lowbush and Highbush Blueberry

(*Vaccinium angustifolium* and *Vaccinium corymbosum*)

General: HEATH FAMILY. Lowbush blueberries are the new vogue—or at least they should be. Some varieties and hybrids of this species are perfectly suited for a patio container, and others for the front of a shrub border. Perhaps they are just as functional as an ornamental plant as they are for a fruit plant.

For a patio plant, I would readily choose the selection named Tophat. Its flavor may not be the absolute best, but the form is perfect. It maintains a rather small mound that would look particularly striking in an equally sized pot. At the Horticulture Center, we even used this plant as a compact part of a shrub border, valuing the fact that it does not spread like some other selections do. We also utilized a superbly flavored hybrid called Northsky that is similar in height to Tophat, just not quite as mounded.

Highbush blueberries are the commercial powerhouses that fill grocery stores across the world.²⁹ Due to this commercial use, there are a vast number of selections and hybrids of this species. We chose Rubel because it has an extremely high level of polyphenols. The berries are small and dark with an intense flavor—reputably good for baking. It also has good fall color.

Unfortunately (but not surprisingly), successful blueberry production requires the same kind of soil requirements as cranberries and lingonberries.³⁰ See Cranberries for a greater discussion of this.

Origin: Lowbush blueberries grow wild in Maine, Nova Scotia, and much of Canada. These blueberries are quite tolerant of fire, and for decades people have burned the wild fields to kill the plant competitors.³¹ Highbush blueberries have a similar but larger range, covering the northeastern United States and Canada all the way west to northeastern Illinois and south to

the Carolinas.³² In the early 1900's the first selections of these wild plants were made, and the commercial blueberry industry was born. The names of these wild-collected plants were taken from the names of the men who discovered them. Rubel, the variety we have planted in the Horticulture Center fruit garden, was named after Rube Leek, one of these original blueberry hunters.³³

Nutrition: The nutritional value of blueberries is essentially the same as cranberries and lingonberries.³⁴ See the Cranberry section for a complete discussion of these properties.

Form/Size: Tophat will grow to about two feet tall and two feet wide. Northsky is about the same height but spreads up to three feet. Rubel fulfills theighbush name by growing to eight feet in height and four feet in diameter.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com)

Meyer Lemon

(*Citrus x meyeri*)

General: RUE FAMILY. To most Midwestern gardeners, the thought of growing a lemon tree will seem preposterous. Lemons cannot survive temperatures lower than 20°F, and anyone who has experienced even a mild Illinois winter would know, temperatures like that are regularly experienced. Yet, the impossible is possible. When planted in a large pot, Meyer lemons and other citrus plants create classy patio plants in the summer and Pottery Barn-esque interior plants in the winter. Survival is merely a matter of moving the plants inside for the colder months of the year. At the Horticulture Center, we bring our plants into a greenhouse for the winter.

The flowers of the Meyer lemon have a tantalizing fragrance, and the yellow fruits are quite

attractive and conspicuous against the glossy, green foliage. Most of the fruit is produced in the spring, although sporadic flowering is typical throughout the year. The skin is edible, and the fruit is less acidic than a true lemon. Pastry chefs are often fond of this fruit.³⁵

Origin: The Meyer lemon was introduced to the United States by Frank Meyer, a plant collector for the Department of Agriculture and the namesake of this plant. He discovered it in China, where it is now a common ornamental plant. It is thought to be a cross between the true lemon species and the mandarin orange.³⁶

Nutrition: Lemons have high vitamin C and potassium. The white part of the rind and the pulp contain calcium, magnesium, and phosphorous. It also helps in fat metabolism. Lemon peel tea can be drunk after a meal for a digestive aid,³⁷ and diluted lemon juice works as a highly anti-bacterial mouthwash, reportedly relieving sore throats. Pure juice is similarly affective for cold sores.³⁸

Form/Size: When planted outdoors in a southern region, Meyer lemons may grow eight to ten feet high. Potted plants can be contained to a smaller size, but no literature indicates what kind of size range to expect. Presumably, the pot size would have a direct effect on plant size: larger pots equaling larger plants.

Suppliers:

1. Stark Bro's (www.starkbros.com)

fail to prove itself. Flowers are abundantly produced prior to leafing out in the spring, and in early summer, the bright red fruits festoon the branches. The fruits taste nearly identical to sour cherries. To cap off the year, winter exposes the lustrous, orange bark on the stems of this plant, creating one last ornamental display.³⁹

Origin: The Nanking cherry is native to central Asia. In eastern Russia, it is one of the most common garden fruit plants, and in Manchuria, it is grown as much for hedges and windbreaks as it is for fruit.⁴⁰ Therefore, in its native haunts, the Nanking cherry is clearly an adaptable and useful ornamental fruit plant.

In the United States, the Nanking cherry has never reached the same popularity achieved overseas. Frank Meyer, the same plant-collector who discovered the Meyer lemon, was one of the first men to bring this plant to the States. In fact, he was so fond of it that he sent his American colleagues an astounding forty-two thousand seeds.⁴¹ So far, however, it has remained in relative obscurity, gracing the gardens of only the privileged few.

Nutrition: See Sour Cherry for a complete discussion of nutritional benefits.

Form/size: This forms an attractive, multi-branched shrub, growing up to eight feet tall.

Suppliers:

1. Hidden Springs Nursery (www.hidden Springsnursery.com)

Nanking Cherry

(*Prunus tomentosa*)

General: ROSE FAMILY. Without doubt, the Nanking cherry is an uncommon inductee into most American gardens. Yet, uncommon does not mean unworthy. From the height of springtime flowering to winter's cold foray, the Nanking cherry does not

PawPaw

(*Asimina triloba*)

General: CUSTARD APPLE FAMILY. Creamy and exotic, the only mystery behind the pawpaw is why it's yet a mystery. Everything about this plant is worthy of mainstream, Main Street, USA. The large fruit is shaped like a short, stout banana.

The interior flesh is juicy and sweet, tasting like a milky mango smoothie, and the exterior skin slacks off with ease. The plant itself is a small tree with enormous, tropical-looking leaves (up to 12 inches long!). Landscape use of this bold, exotic texture is quite foreseeable; the only stipulation being that shade must be provided for young plants. Older plants tolerate and actually fruit better in the sun, but some tender love and shade is a prerequisite.⁴²

Origin: Upon tasting a pawpaw for the first time, one's initial reaction will be to ask what country has been greedily hiding this fruit from everyone else. The answer, believe it or not, is found with us. Although largely unknown, the pawpaw is actually native to 26 different states—even Illinois—and it is actually the largest edible fruit native to the United States.⁴³ Funks Grove, a protected woodland just south of Bloomington, has an abundance of these plants growing in its rich, moist understory.

Early settlers were incredibly fond of this fruit, commonly bestowing the name of the fruit upon towns, creeks, and islands.⁴⁴ In fact, there is even a Paw Paw, IL.

Nutrition: When it comes to nutrition, pawpaws are about as good as it gets. They contain far more minerals than bananas, apples, or oranges—only beaten in one case: potassium. Bananas have a slightly higher concentration of this mineral, but it is still almost double the content of apples and oranges. Pawpaws also have more vitamin A and C than apples and bananas.⁴⁵

Form/Size: Trees grow to about 15 or 25 feet in height, with a slightly wider spread.

Suppliers:

1. Stark Bro's (www.starkbros.com)
2. Hidden Springs Nursery (www.hiddenspringsnursery.com)

Peach

(*Prunus persica*)

General: ROSE FAMILY. To explain the peach to anyone in generalities is like trying to explain the basic principles of cubism to Picasso; these large, juice-filled fruits simply need no introduction. That said, however, for those wanting to raise these plants, the peach tree itself may need some explanation. These plants often suffer from a whole myriad of pests and diseases. For maximum longevity, locate in moist sites with full sun. Otherwise, the advice offered by some of the most knowledgeable tree experts in the country is to simply acknowledge that your tree will not live forever.⁴⁶

Origin: Peaches originated in China and Persia. Its journey to the United States is largely credited first to the Romans, who did a good job spreading the peach throughout Europe, and secondly to the Spanish explorers that brought the peach to colonial settlements in Florida, in the mid 1500's. After that, Native Americans and settlers planted peaches all across the country, and it is still grown in a majority of our states today.⁴⁷

Nectarines are a variety of peach (*Prunus persica* var. *nucipersica*).

Nutrition: Peaches (and nectarines) have a high level of vitamin A and C, and for minerals, they are a good source of potassium and phosphorus.⁴⁸

Form/Size: I need to see if I can figure out the cultivar of this tree because the size can vary considerably.

Suppliers: We used a local garden center, but many mail-order nurseries are available.

Raspberry

(Rubus idaeus)

General: ROSE FAMILY. As with blackberries, I found it terribly hard to find a good book discussing raspberries—and next to nothing comparing the taste of different selections. In the descriptions written by the plant-seller’s marketing department, nearly all of the offered selections sound wonderful. Nonetheless, we had to choose, and we chose Prelude. This is a new introduction from Cornell that is supposed to fruit earlier and longer than most other selections. Also, compared to the other early varieties, the fruit is reportedly larger.

I like books so much because they tend to weed out the plant breeder’s gimmicks—ploys such as early fruiting or big fruit. The authors tend to cut through all word-spun fog, and simply tell you what tastes good. Thus, I am somewhat ashamed that without Virgil’s wise guidance, I quickly succumbed to the salesman’s tricks.

Origin: Raspberries are native to Turkey. There, in the foothills of Mount Ida (hence the scientific name *Rubus IDAeus*), the ancient people of Troy are believed to have been the first domesticators of this fruit. From there, the berries spread to Greece and Rome, and the Romans are believed to have distributed the fruits to the rest of Europe.⁴⁹ A subdivision of this species (*Rubus idaeus* var. *strigosus*) is native to Illinois.⁵⁰

Nutrition: Raspberries are very rich in vitamin C, with moderate amounts of calcium, iron, magnesium and potassium. They also contain pectin fiber, which helps eliminate cholesterol and protects against environmental toxins. Raspberries are excellent for the digestion.⁵¹

Form/Size: Raspberries typically grow as an arching shrub, and sizes are quite variable. The creeping raspberry (*Rubus x stellarcticus*) will only grow about five inches tall and spreads prostrate along the

ground.

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann’s Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com)

Red Currant

(Ribes rubrum)

General: SAXIFRAGE FAMILY. If fruit were chosen for beauty alone, red currants would dominate the produce section of every grocery store. They are produced in long, pendulous chains, like extravagant ruby jewelry, and the plants that bear them look like they are dressed for the king’s ball. I have seen a picture of this grown as an espalier (a method by which a tree or shrub is pruned to resemble a vine), and the effect was downright astounding. The fruits are good for jelly and wine. Most fruits are too tart to be eaten fresh, but some plant selections produce fruit that’s sweet enough to be eaten right off the plant.

Origin: Red currants are native to cooler regions of Europe and Asia.⁵² In eighteenth century England, currants became so popular that enthusiasts would force the plants to produce fruit in the early spring and late fall by covering them with glass structures. (This same method is often used today to get flowering bulbs to bloom in the middle of winter.) A certain currant enthusiast from this period named Henry Philips found that he could even further extend his enjoyment of the fruit by carefully packing the currants into glass bottles and burying them in chests of sand. Using this primitive method of preservation, the fruit would last for years!⁵³

Nutrition: Red currants possess vitamin C, iron, potassium, and fiber. They are beneficial for the immune system, and red currant jelly can even be used as an antiseptic for minor burns.⁵⁴

Form/Size: Currants are typically grown as a large,

upright shrub, but a gardener with a smart set of pruners would have little trouble transforming this into a small ornamental tree or an espalier. Plants should be spaced about five feet apart.⁵⁵

Suppliers:

1. Hartmann's Plant Co. (www.hartmannsplantcompany.com).

Sour Cherry

(Prunus cerasus)

General: ROSE FAMILY. Growing up, a cherry tree planted in my front yard was a continuous source of many fond memories—and just as many fine pies. It is the taste of summer. Alas, my opinion is often shared by our feathered friends of flight, who will settle into a tree and polish off the whole crop leaving but a scattered remnant for our pies. Regardless, I would not trade a sour cherry tree for much of anything else.

Origin: The sour cherry plant probably originated in Iran and Turkmenistan from the natural cross between sweet cheery (*Prunus avium*) and ground cherry (*Prunus fruticosa*). Experts believe that birds dispersed the seeds into Europe (some things never change), where the Greeks readily became the first culture to cultivate sour cherries. Ultimately, they found their way into the United States by way of English colonists.⁵⁶

Nutrition: Cherries have a high amount of bioflavonoids, a type of compound with significant antioxidant properties.⁵⁷ In addition, they are also rich in potassium, with moderate amounts of vitamin C, copper, and iron. The copper and iron are important for our bodies' blood. Cherries also work wonders on cleaning and enlivening the digestive system.⁵⁸

Form/Size: These are generally round, well-mannered trees, and under commercial cultivation, they are contained at about 15 feet tall.⁵⁹

Suppliers: We used a local garden center, but many mail-order nurseries are available.

Valencia Oranga

(Citrus sinensis 'Valencia')

General: RUE FAMILY. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about growing potted citrus plants like this is that it connects the act of eating with the act of growing—a process that for the orange is usually separated from us by a thousand or more miles. It is strange, but we live in a world where these fruits that should be so exotic to us are actually commonplace. Save for the world traveler, many or most Midwesterners have probably never seen a ripe orange dangling heavy on a branch, yet we were probably eating these fruits before we had even cut all our teeth. Therefore, growing one of these on your patio is more than a chic, modern statement; it is a means of connecting you and anyone else with the beginning of the food chain we terminate.

Origin: The orange originated in China before being brought to Europe by Spanish and Portuguese explorers. The Valencia orange derives its name from the famous Spanish coastal city Valencia, and it is simply a late-producing selection of the orange species. It is one of the most commercially important varieties grown in California and Florida.⁶⁰

Nutrition: A single orange a day can fulfill the minimum requirement of vitamin C. This well-known vitamin is important in stimulating the immune system, as is beta-carotene, another abundant vitamin found in oranges. Thus, oranges and orange juice are commonly self-prescribed medication for the common cold. Actually, oranges contain nearly all vitamins and minerals to some degree.⁶¹

Form/Size: I assume that the orange, like the lemon, will be relatively contained in relation to the size of the pot.

Suppliers:

1. Stark Bro's (www.starkbros.com)

Wonderberry or Sunberry (*Solanum burbankii*)

General: NIGHTSHADE FAMILY. Wonderberry fans claim the black, pea-sized fruits of this plant rival or even surpass the flavor of blueberries. Do not discount their claim, but try not to get too excited. We grew several masses of this plant at the Horticulture Center the first year of the fruit garden, and these plants were never plucked clean of their fruits. Unfortunately, this had very little to do with their flavor. The main complications arose from a research revelation we had after growing and raising a number of these plants: the unripe fruits are poisonous. Although the berries change color when ripe, and the ripe berries are harmless,⁶² this discouraged most of us from gobbling up the berries. Nonetheless, if your curiosity is piqued, the berries are rather tasty, and any discriminate omnivore will have no trouble distinguishing between ripe and unripe fruits.

Origin: Perhaps what makes the wonderberry so interesting is the controversy that has enveloped its history. Luther Burbank—considered a plant breeding genius to some and a quack to others—bred and introduced this plant in the early 1900's calling it a sunberry. Although he alleged the plant was a hybrid cross between an African and European species of nightshades (*Solanum guinense* and *Solanum villosum* respectively), people quickly accused him of simply reintroducing the common black nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*).⁶³ Modern tests have shown that the genetics of these two species make a hybrid cross nearly impossible, so the exact parentage is still an unsolved mystery.⁶⁴ Burbank himself claimed to his death that it was his own hybrid creation.⁶⁵

Nutrition: Common black nightshade and its other close relatives have been recognized for medicinal purposes since the first century Greeks. An early

herbalist recounted that the fruits could be used for soothing various skin disease, headaches, stomach-aches, and ear pain. More recently, nightshade extracts have been used for relieving the spasms caused by bronchitis and asthma.⁶⁶

Form/Size: Wonderberries form a somewhat spindly herbaceous plant, one to two feet high.

Suppliers:

1. Seed Savers (seedsavers.com)
2. Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds

NOTES:

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3. Anne Collins, "Strawberries," Anne Collins, <http://www.annecollins.com/diet-foods.html>.
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7. Collins, "Apples."
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11. Trehane, 29.
12. Trehane, 22, 29-30.
13. Collins, "Cranberries."
14. Trehane, 34.
15. Reich, 121, 132.
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17. Floyd Swink and Geroud Wilhelm, *Plants of the Chicago Region* (Indianapolis: Indiana Academy of Science, 1994), 638.
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19. Reich, 126.
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23. Reich, 69.
24. Reich, 72.
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26. Reich, 57.
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30. Trehane, 122.
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32. Trehane, 101.
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36. "Arc of Taste: Meyer," Slow Food USA.
37. Haas, 305.
38. Collins, "Lemon."
39. Reich, 162-164.
40. Reich, 162.
41. Reich, 163.
42. Reich, 45-47.
43. "Arc of Taste: Pawpaw," Slow Food USA, http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/ark_product_detail/pawpaw/.
44. Reich, 42.
45. Snake C. Jones and Desmond R. Layne, "Pawpaw Description and Nutritional Information," Kentucky State University Cooperative Extension Program, <http://www.pawpaw.kysu.edu/pawpaw/cooking.htm#Table%202>.
46. Michael A. Dirr, Manual of Woody Landscape Plants: Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation, and Use (Champaign, IL: Stipes 1998), 303.
47. Mark Rieger, "Peach," University of Georgia, <http://www.uga.edu/fruit>.
48. Haas, 304.
49. Reiger, "Raspberries."
50. Swink and Wilhelm, 650.
51. Collins, "Raspberries."
52. Reich, 179.
53. Reich, 184.
54. Collins, "Raspberries."
55. Reich, 182.
56. Reiger, "Cherries."
57. Collins, "Cherries."
58. Haas, 303.
59. Reiger, "Cherries."
60. Julia F. Morton, "Orange," Purdue University, <http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/morton/orange.html>.
61. Haas, 305.
62. Charles B. Heiser, Nightshades: The Paradoxical Plants (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company 1969), 92.
63. Heiser, 63-65.
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