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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
Quince, medlars, jujubes add new flavors to gardens



Quince is among the unusual fruits you can grow in your garden.

Question: I love to grow unusual varieties of fruits and vegetables. Can you recommend any fruit trees that would grow well in our area and whose fruit is not readily available in grocery stores or farmers markets?

Answer: What a great idea! Several good options come to mind. While they all require full sun and well-drained soil, some are self-pollinating and adapted to USDA Zones 6-9, which covers most of Sonoma County.

Quinces (*Cydonia oblonga*) are, like apples and pears, a pome fruit, with large white blossoms. These blossoms develop into a yellowish fruit about the size of a large apple, but with a fuzzy covering. They originated in Asia Minor and have been grown in Asia and the Mediterranean for more than 4,000 years.

Quince trees are relatively small, with most reaching about 8 to 12 feet tall. They are easily damaged by strong winds, so plant them in a sheltered location. Quince trees have many of the same pest problems as apple and pear trees, such as codling moth, scale, spider mites and aphids. They are also particularly susceptible to fire blight. Avoid heavy nitrogen fertilizers that promote excessive growth, which makes them more vulnerable.

Unlike apples and pears, quinces must be peeled and cooked before eating, which has made them a less popular fruit. However, their delicious and complex flavor, which is a cross between apple and pear, makes them worth the effort.

For more information on quince, see <https://bit.ly/45oB9ul> and <https://bit.ly/46j1kUF>

Mulberries tasty, messy

Fruiting mulberries originated in Southwest Asia and were naturalized throughout Europe. They come in white, red and black varieties, with the black variety (*Morus nigra*) reportedly having the best flavor.

The black mulberries are large and juicy, with a good balance of sweetness and tartness. Eat them raw or use them in baking as you would blackberries. The black variety is also the smallest plant of the three, growing to about 30 feet high. It can be grown as a tree or bush.

All heavy producers, mulberry trees are generally pest- and disease free. The black and red fruits will stain anything they touch, so avoid planting the trees near a driveway, sidewalk, deck or patio. Keep them pruned to a small, manageable size. Dwarf varieties are now available that you can grow in the ground or in a large container to further limit their size.

For information on mulberries, see <https://bit.ly/3PWcZlq>

Medlars are sweet, fruity

Medlars (*Mespilus germanica*) are native to Southwest Asia and belong to the same family as apples, pears and quinces. Medlars were grown in Greece starting around 700 B.C. and came to Rome in about 200 B.C. The Romans loved them, and their images can be found on mosaics in Pompeii. Medlars were also very popular in Europe and the United Kingdom from the Middle Ages through the Victorian era.

The fruit doesn't travel well, so today they are primarily a home garden tree. The tree is beautiful as an ornamental plant, and the fruit is delicious and unique. Unlike many other fruit trees, the leaves unfold before the blossoms. Each blossom opens singly, with white petals similar to a wild rose. Most are relatively small trees or shrubs, usually growing to about 15 to 20 feet. They are slightly susceptible to fire blight and leaf hoppers but are generally considered to be pest- and disease-resistant.

The fruit is unusual in appearance, like a small apple with a rough, reddish-brown skin. The end is flared in a five-pointed star shape. Harvest the fruit in the fall, when they part easily from the tree. Then set them in a cool, light place to ripen for two or three weeks before eating them. When fully ripe, the skin will be dark and wrinkled and the pulp will be soft and mushy. The taste of fully ripe medlars is described as something like very rich applesauce with hints of wine, spiced pears and sweet prunes. You can eat the fruit fresh or cooked.

For information on medlars, see <https://bit.ly/46pmrVf> and <https://bit.ly/3Qc3C2k>

Jujubes grow on trees

Jujubes (*Ziziphus jujuba*), also known as Chinese dates, are beautiful ornamental trees with small pear-shaped fruit that are sweet and chewy. Originally from China, jujubes were brought to the United States in the mid-19th century. The trees generally reach 15 to 30 feet tall, with shiny oval leaves and small pale green-yellow flowers. They are drought-resistant and usually pest- and disease-free.

Although some cultivars can self-pollinate and set fruit, cross-pollination improves fruit set and yield, so consider planting two trees.

Harvest the highly nutritious fruit for fresh eating when they're mottled with brown, or leave them on the tree to dry. The dried fruit resembles a date and, after removing the pit, you can eat them and use them in cooking as a substitute for raisins or dates. Dried fruits keep for over a year at cool temperatures.

For information on jujubes, see <https://bit.ly/46j2csp> and <https://bit.ly/48PLAKs>

Contributors to this week's column were Wendy Stern, Patricia Rosales and Robert Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County <https://sonomamgucanr.edu>, provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at [707565-2608](tel:707565-2608) or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.