

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



Crab Apple

Malus sylvestris

Crann fia-úll

The native Crab Apple, *Malus sylvestris* is a tree of woodlands and hedgerows throughout Ireland. (Gaeilge : Crann fia-ull. A 'Noble of the Wood' it was valued as a food and used to make mead. It was also thought to be from another world; the tree of paradise.)

Mature trees can reach 10m in height and has an irregular, rounded shape and a wide, spreading canopy. The greyish brown, flecked bark can become quite gnarled and twisted, especially in exposed areas, and the twigs often develop spines.

The brown and pointed leaf buds form on short stalks, and have downy hair on their tips, followed by glossy, oval leaves, which grow to a length of 6cm and have rounded triangular teeth. In Spring, the sweetly scented blossoms provide an important source of early pollen and nectar for insects, particularly bees, and other insects. In autumn yellow-green apple-like fruits develop 2-3cm across. The fruits can be flushed with red or white spots when ripe. Many species of birds, e.g. blackbirds, thrushes and crows, and mammals, including mice, foxes and badgers eat the fruit and disperse the seeds.

The crab apple is one of few host trees to the parasitic mistletoe, *Viscum album*, and is often covered in lichens.

Apple wood was burned by the Celts during fertility rites and festivals, and Shakespeare makes reference to crab apples in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labour Lost*.

The pinkish wood has an even texture and makes good quality timber, and lends itself particularly well to carving and turning. It also makes a sweetly scented firewood. In Ireland a yellow dye was extracted from the bark to colour wool.

Crab apple trees are often planted in commercial orchards as their long flowering period makes them excellent pollination partners for cultivated apples. The fruit is used to make crab apple jelly, and also as a natural source of pectin for setting jams.