

Crab Apple *Malus sylvestris*

What's in a name?

The crab apple is one of four wild apple species in the world and many commercial varieties available today are derived from it. It is native to the UK and is often found in some of the older more mature hedges.

The name is thought to have derived from the spiny and twisted appearance of the trunk and bark.



Botany & Ecology

The trees often lean at acute angles, propped up by the established vegetation within the hedge row. The flowers are in full bloom during April and May and have a scent not dissimilar to that of honeysuckle.

The leaf buds are small, purple in colour with white hairs and break in the early spring, the leaves are heart shaped and glossy when they first unfurl.

In the Spring, the white and pink flowers provide an important source of pollen and nectar for insects, particularly bees. The fruit is eaten by birds, including blackbirds, thrushes and crows. Mice, voles, foxes and badgers also eat the fallen fruit whether it is ripe or not. Even the leaves provide food for the caterpillars of many moths, including the eyed hawk-moth.

Folklore

The apple as a whole has long been the subject of folklore with much of it being localised. The young ladies of Yorkshire believed that to cut an apple in half without cutting a pip would ensure a long and true marriage. If one pip was cut, the marriage would be stormy. If two were cut the relationship would be short lived.

The pip was also used in Kent by a young lady who had more than one suitor. It was tradition among those ladies working in the orchards to name a pip after each of the young men who had expressed an interest. The pip was made moist and applied to the face and the last pip to fall would be the right man to court or marry.



Folk Medicine

Apples of any variety contain healing agents which include amino acids, malic and tartaric acid, vitamins and mineral salts. The original crab apple was used to cure infections of the intestine, constipation, bronchial disorders and hoarseness.

Physicians would recommend that pregnant women should grate an apple and eat it slowly first thing in the morning to cure morning sickness.

In early medicine, it was believed that an apple had very special, if not magical, healing properties. It was common practise in the mediaeval period to crush the apple and apply it to warts. After a period, the apple was removed and buried in the belief that the wart would go with it.

The unsweetened juice was gargled to cure sore throats and the crushed flesh was applied to the eyes in an effort to cure inflammation.