



Alabama's *TREASURED* Forests
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P.O. Box 302550
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-2550
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Southern Crab Apple

(*Malus angustifolia*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

What could be more American than apple pie? Well, it seems surprising that the beautiful, familiar “eating” apples that we see in supermarkets and our apple pies are not native to North America; they originated thousands of miles away, in central and western Asia, including eastern Turkey, Kazakhstan, and northwestern China. We do, however, have a few American apples. Our native *Malus angustifolia* is one of about 30 “crabs” that are indigenous to temperate areas in the northern hemisphere, including the Southern United States. Though our native crab apple is not a culinary treasure, it is a beautiful small tree that has

value as a forage plant for a long list of wildlife species including quail, rabbits, skunks, foxes, turkeys, and white-tailed deer.

Southern crab apple is a small, irregular tree to about 35 feet tall, sometimes seen as a large colonial shrub. The leaves are deciduous, alternate, oblong, to about 3 inches long, 2 inches wide, with rounded, sometimes serrate marginal teeth. The fruits are small yellow-green apples, broader than long, less than 2 inches across, often produced in huge numbers. Even when fully ripe in the fall, the apples are extremely astringent and sour-tasting. They are found growing in a variety of open, well-drained or moist habitats scattered throughout the Deep South except peninsular Florida. They are native throughout Alabama, but less frequently seen in southern and coastal areas of the state. The gorgeous, five-petaled fragrant, pink and white spring flowers have made them popular ornamen-

tals in parks and home landscapes throughout the United States and Europe.

Crab apples are a good source of pectin, a complex carbohydrate used to thicken or “set” jellies and preserves. Pectin is also used in laboratories as a culture medium for fungi and bacteria. With a lot of sugar, the juice pressed from ripe crabs can be made into a pretty brownish-red jelly. Medicinal claims for pectin derived from crab apples include the lowering of cholesterol levels and stabilizing of blood sugar.

The wood of crab apple trees is extremely hard and difficult to carve. It makes durable handles for knives and, when available, for larger implements such as axes. It burns extremely hot; in the grill the smoke has a pleasant scent and imparts a mild, sweet flavor that is said to be excellent for chicken or pork.

When in bloom, masses of pink and white crab apple flowers are a fragrant and beautiful sight. Even in midwinter, when the leaves and flowers are gone, the dark, craggy branches are interesting, dramatic features in natural woodlands and in our landscapes. Many named varieties are available from nurseries and garden centers. Since they are small trees, they don't need much space, and the birds will love their dense crowns for nesting sites.

The Alabama state champion southern crab apple, *Malus angustifolia*, is 59 inches in circumference, 39 feet tall, with an average crown spread of 27 feet, located in Montgomery County. When spring arrives and this magnificent giant is in flower, it must be a spectacular site to behold! ♣

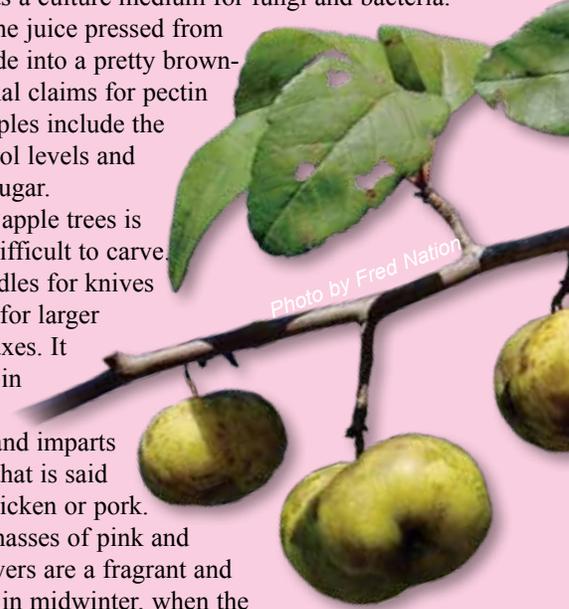
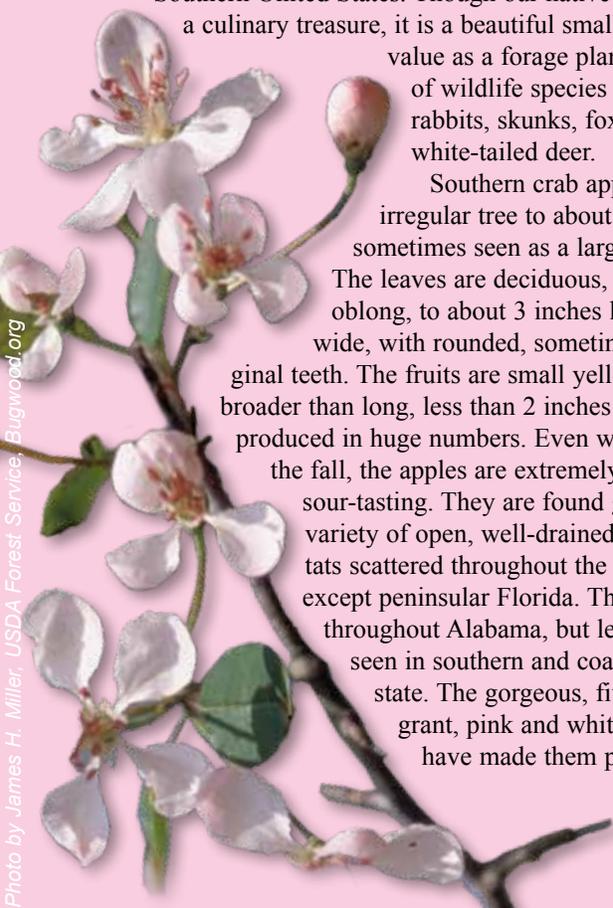


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