



Plants for Birds:

Crabapple

- **Scientific Name:** *Malus* spp. (Rosaceae Family)
- **Height:** 10–25 feet
- **Hardiness:** Zone 2, 3, or 4, depending on species
- **Wildlife Value:** Abundance of food for birds and mammals, provides nesting sites, attracts pollinators

The common crabapple is a highly popular ornamental tree. A member of the genus *Malus*, it is cousin to the orchard apple but with much smaller and more tart fruits. It is a stunningly beautiful tree in bloom, with blossoms in shades of pink, magenta, purple and white. In the fall persistent red, sour tasting fruit linger into winter. As well as being incredibly showy, the blossoms attract pollinators and are also eaten with relish by waxwings and other birds. The abundance of fruit in the fall is a welcome food source for deer, squirrels, rabbits, and a plethora of bird species including robins, waxwings, flickers, finches, chickadees, grouse and turkeys. Many of the crabapples hold their fruit all through the winter providing a food source when it is needed most.

Crabapples are adaptable, hardy, easy to grow, and are widely available in numerous varieties. Although not native to Montana, several species of crabapple are native



Bohemian Waxwings photo by Jerry Taylor.

to the United States; thus the cultivars attract insects, pollinators, and birds in a manner similar to native plants. Crabapples tend to grow 10 to 25 feet tall and 15 to 25 feet wide with low canopies good for planting under power lines. They prefer full sun and well drained, heavy loam, moist soils but will

tolerate some clay types as well. Crabapples are fairly drought tolerant once established.

There are reported to be over 1000 different cultivars of crabapples all displaying different characteristics in flower/fruit color, disease resistance, hardiness, timing of flowering, leaf color, number of flower petals, and size. There are even some grown for their fruit, being tasty for jellies and preserves. It is said there is a crabapple variety to meet every landscape need. Gardeners should know that some people find the fruits of some cultivars messy after dropping and that some varieties are susceptible to fire blight, so choose your cultivars carefully.

Crabapple trees are a fantastic addition to your garden, adding color and accent, as well as attracting a variety of birds with fruit, flowers, insects, cover and nesting sites.