

Guavas, quinces and other edible ornamentals

By Don Shor

SPECIAL TO THE ENTERPRISE

Strawberry jam and a marketing ploy prompted this column.

One grower started labeling some of his attractive winter vegetables as “ornamedibles,” to suggest to customers that the leaves are pretty as well as edible. OK, it makes a good point, but it’s a little too cute for me.

Garden writer Rosalind Creasy came up with a more staid term in her book, “The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping,” published by Sierra Club Books in 1982 and due for an updated edition in January. Creasy likes “edible landscaping.” The idea is simple: Mix edible plants into your landscape. Choose landscape shrubs and trees that happen to provide food as well as beauty.

Grow your vegetables, flowers and herbs together, for mutual benefit. The herbs and flowers draw beneficial insects for the vegetables, among other things.

Some common landscape shrubs meet these criteria: Rose hips (fruit) can be used in tea, for example. Others aren’t as well known, but include some adaptable shrubs and vines.

Many of these plants help fill the harvest basket in fall and winter.

Myrtle family

An unassuming little shrub in the myrtle family came our way the other day. It has tight, shiny, dark green leaves and a compact growth habit. Scattered along the branches were dark, reddish-purple fruit, about the size of blueberries. A wonderful aroma of strawberries and guavas rose from the plant; it smelled just like fresh strawberry jam!

The little berries had a sweet/tart flavor and a mealy, semi-juicy texture.

Ugni molinae is the odd name of this delightful little shrub. Native to Chile and parts of Argentina, it’s sold by the common name Chilean guava. *Ugni* is a rare case where an indigenous name has been used for the botanical name; taxonomists usually employ Latin (rarely Greek) names.

In southern Chile, the fruit is combined with hard liquor and syrup to make a liqueur called Murtado, which translates to “little myrtle.”

Chilean guava will take full sun or shade, and average water or drought; it will grow to 6 feet or so if allowed, but can be readily pruned to keep it small.

Plant this near a window, where you can enjoy the aromatic fruit, or near a path for quick nibbling. It’s adaptable, ornamental and edible.

Another shrub with edible fall fruit, also in the myrtle family and originating in South America, is *Feijoa sellowiana*, commonly called pineapple guava. The name is indigenous, but not of the fruit itself. *Feijoa* actually is named after a Brazilian botanist.

And here’s more obscure information about the name: It has nothing to do with a

feijoada, a Portuguese bean and meat stew common in Brazil; *feijoada* derives from the Portuguese word for beans, which is *feijado*.

Some taxonomists give the plant’s name as *Acca sellowiana*, which is the name by which you’ll find it on the UC Davis Arboretum All-Star list, but which rarely is used in other references.

But I digress.

The dark green leaves are gray and fuzzy on the underside, giving an overall olive-green effect. The fleshy pink flowers are edible, sweet and popular with birds. The fruit is nubbly and dark green, ripening during October and November. The fruit usually is cut in half, and the fleshy interior eaten with a spoon, although it’s said to make an excellent chutney.

Harvest the fruit when they begin to fall. They can store for a few weeks in a dry, cool location.

This is a tough ornamental shrub, tolerant of sun, some shade, wind and drought. In fact, it’s most commonly planted as an ornamental in Northern California. *Feijoa* can be trained as an attractive small tree, or clipped as a large hedge. Many growers propagate it from seed, so the fruit is variable, but some do cuttings or grafted plants of the varieties that have been selected for large, high-quality fruit.

Both of these have the common name “guava” but are not considered true guavas. Do true guavas grow here? Well, these members of the genus *Psidium* (the “P” is silent), also in the myrtle family, usually are thought to be too tropical. But strawberry guava (*Psidium cattleianum*) has been grown without cold damage in the Sacramento Valley, and is about as hardy as your citrus: Plan to protect it during serious freeze events, but most winters aren’t an issue.

Flowering shrubs

One ornamental with very showy flowers is little known for its fruit, but well worth seeking: *Chaenomeles japonica*, the flowering quince. As the name suggests, it’s closely related to the fruiting quince. This bright-blossomed deciduous shrub is the first to flower in our late winters.

The most common variety is red, but white, salmon and pink options exist, and the plants range in height from 3 to 8 feet or more.

Flowering quince is quite adaptable, tolerant of sun or shade, and moderately drought-tolerant. Some varieties set moderate crops of 2- to 3-inch yellow fruit that resemble very hard, lumpy apples, ripening in mid-fall and holding on the plant well into winter. The fruit is unbelievably aromatic and cooks down into a rich sauce, which is useful for flavoring roasts or making into jam or jelly.

Not every variety sets fruit, and reference books don’t list them that way. If you see one with fruit, ask the owner if you can harvest them. Most people have no idea they’re edible.

A couple of vines have edible fruit.

Akebia quinata is an attractive, well-mannered deciduous vine that twines to about 15 feet. The flowers are dusky purple or white, and they smell like vanilla. The fruit is pretty rare, but looks like a purplish sausage and has a taste that is described as sweet with a consistency that is “an acquired taste.”

The vine stems, according to one forum, are sought by basket weavers to “make intricate and delicate basketry.”

Passiflora is the genus of vines (some rampant) that includes the subtropical passion fruits, as well as the ornamental passion flowers. Most varieties of *Passiflora edulis*, grown especially for fruit, are more tender, although they can be grown here with protection. Some of the other species and varieties, generally grown for their showy flowers, happen to also produce edible, even tasty, fruit.

Examples include *P. mollissima* and *P. vitifolia*. All the passion flowers are likely to show frost damage in a normal winter here, but recover quickly during spring.

Citrus

Some citrus are grown as ornamentals, thanks to clean shiny leaves, fragrant flowers and colorful fruit that happens to be tasty. Kumquats and calamondins are among the most attractive citrus, thanks to their dense growth habits and narrow leaves. Both flower over a longer period than other citrus, setting and holding bright orange fruit nearly year-around.

Sour oranges have long been planted as ornamentals, with fruit used in preserves and marmalades.

Kumquats are in the genus *Fortunella*, not Citrus, and are native to a colder region of China than other citrus. They therefore can be grown well north of the usual range of citrus, and were unscathed by our major Sacramento Valley freezes of 1990 and 1998. (The fruit on my Nagami kumquat froze solid and fell off at 16 degrees in 1990, but the leaves weren’t even damaged; a nearby navel orange was nearly killed.)

The fruit is tart but the peel is sweet, so the way to eat a kumquat is to pop it whole into your mouth and chew it up quickly.

The tangy flesh will startle you, but will be balanced by the sweet skin.

Calamondin (*calamansi* in the Philippines) generally is described as a hybrid between a kumquat and a tangerine. This puts it in the relatively hardy category, as citrus go. The peel is sweet, but the flesh is quite tart; it’s usually used as a garnish — squeeze onto fish, as with lemon — or for sweetened drinks.

Braver souls pop the fruit whole into the mouth and chew rapidly. Most people who grow calamondin just consider it an ornamental shrub with fragrant blossoms and showy fruit.

Sour oranges actually are a signature tree in downtown



COURTESY PHOTOS

Above, calamondin fruit look just like miniature tangerines, and peel about as readily. But the flesh is very tart! As a result, they’re normally just cut in half, and the juice is squeezed out for flavoring. The juice is used to garnish seafood, as with lemons or limes, or in sweetened drinks. These bushy plants boast attractive leaves and have fruit nearly year-round. Below, *Feijoa* is the botanical name of the pineapple guava — some class it in the genus *Acca* — and also is the common name of the fruit. The flowers are edible as well, with thick, sweet petals. It’s a common landscape shrub, but you need to buy cutting-grown or grafted trees of selected varieties for reliable, good-quality fruit.

Sacramento. A stately line of them, probably the Seville variety, can be seen leading up to the east entrance of the Capitol building.

Large showy fruit litters the ground during winter, and countless tourists have tried to eat them.

But sour oranges, although intensely flavored, are both very tart and somewhat bitter, requiring lots of sugar to be palatable. Hence they’re the classic fruit for marmalade. (Two pounds of sour oranges, about six to eight fruit, makes about 11 cups of marmalade. A tree produces 50 to 100 fruit or more.)

Not very many gardeners plant sour oranges anymore, what with more tasty relatives available here, but a couple of varieties are worth mentioning and seeking out as garden plants. Chinotto has small, attractive leaves and a very tight, bushy growth habit on a slow-growing plant with clusters of small, shiny orange fruit. It’s sometimes called the myrtle-leaf citrus.

(There’s that myrtle again; citrus aren’t in the myrtle family, but there is a resemblance of the foliage.)

Bouquet de Fleurs has huge clusters of extra-fragrant flowers and attractive fruit. Chinotto makes a great bonsai; Bouquet de Fleurs often is used as a focal container specimen. One other sour orange worth noting is the Bergamot, which has extra-pungent fruit that is used to flavor Earl Gray tea.

This is the lazy way to get food from the garden! We choose plants that are pretty and easy to grow, and the fruit becomes a nice bonus.

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AGE: The play’s composer has come from Australia

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“It’s absolutely strange and exciting,” Merlin continued, “and Eve is up against the fact that her mom is dying, and she doesn’t want her mom to die. Can she come up with this discovery before her mom dies?”

But Eve misses the point: that her mother is at peace with the approaching end of her life, and is ready to die.

Merlin warned to the subject.

“She says lines to the effect of ‘What would I do for another 70 years in this body? Why would I want to?’ My character can’t understand that. Surely everybody wants to live forever. Then my character has an epiphany, and thinks maybe she’s got it all wrong. Maybe there’s a natural flow and order to things.”

Kim Deacon has flown in from Australia, to sing the role of Esme’s “soul.”

“I worked with Jade about 18 years ago, in a play that we devised called ‘The Last Room,’” the singer explained.

“It’s a very beautiful piece that combined some text from Tennessee Williams and the surrealist playwright Arabella; I also sang in that play. We enjoyed the process of working together very much.

“We always had in our minds to work together again, so I’ve kept up with her over the years.”

When McCutcheon was in Australia at Christmas, visiting family, she talked with Deacon about flying to the States to perform in “The Elephant’s Graveyard.”

Deacon, who had been discussing the possibility of such a project with McCutcheon for a long time, was happy to comply.

Garrett Ian Shatzer, who composed the songs for the production, happened to be in Australia this summer, while McCutcheon was at home again to see her own aging mother. They met with Deacon at that time, to go over the music.

“When I heard Garrett’s music, I

thought it was fantastic,” Deacon said. “Every song is beautiful.”

“Different things in this play will appeal to different people,” Merlin said. “Some will absolutely love the music, some will get involved in the science, and some will get very involved in the story about what to do when our parents get older.

“It has stirred up a lot of stuff for me, because my parents are in their 70s. They’re in the UK; I’m here in the USA. They’re fit at the moment. What happens when they’re not?”

As I watched the relationship between Esme and her daughter during the two rehearsals I attended, and listened to Deacon give voice to Esme’s soul, and watched the evolution in the lives of Esme’s friends in the nursing home, I drove home certain that people seeing this play will leave the theater with a lot of things to think about.

And, if they still have living parents, a lot of them will feel like calling Mom or Dad.