

“The Crab” from Thoreau’s essay, *Wild Apples*

Nevertheless, our wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock. Wilder still, as I have said, there grows elsewhere in this country a native and aboriginal crab-apple, *Malus coronaria*, “whose nature has not yet been modified by cultivation.” It is found from western New York to Minnesota, and southward. Michaux says that its ordinary height “is fifteen or eighteen feet, but it is sometimes found twenty-five or thirty feet high,” and that the large ones “exactly resemble the common apple tree. “The flowers are white mingled with rose color, and are collected in corymbs.” They are remarkable for their delicious odor. The fruit, according to him, is about an inch and a half in diameter, and is intensely acid. Yet they make fine sweetmeats and also cider of them. He concludes that “if, on being cultivated, it does not yield new and palatable varieties, it will at least be celebrated for the beauty of its flowers, and for the sweetness of its perfume.”

I never saw the crab-apple till May, 1861. I had heard of it through Michaux, but more modern botanists, so far as I know, have not treated it as of any peculiar importance. Thus it was a half-fabulous tree to me. I contemplated a pilgrimage to the “Glades,” a portion of Pennsylvania where it was said to grow to perfection. I thought of sending to a nursery for it, but doubted if they had it, or would distinguish it from European varieties. At last I had occasion to go to Minnesota, and on entering Michigan I began to notice from the cars a tree with handsome rose-colored flowers. At first I thought it some variety of thorn; but it was not long before the truth flashed on me, that this was my long-sought crab-apple. It was the prevailing flowering shrub or tree to be seen from the cars at that season of the year, -- about the middle of May. But the cars never stopped before one, and so I was launched on the bosom of the Mississippi without having touched one, experiencing the fate of Tantalus. On arriving at St. Anthony’s Falls, I was sorry to be told that I was too far north for the crab-apple. Nevertheless I succeeded in finding it about eight miles west of the Falls; touched it and smelled it, and secured a lingering corymb of flowers for my herbarium. This must have been near its northern limit.

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau*. Selected and edited by Lewis Hyde. New York: North Point Press, 2002.

Illustration from *Make Friends of Trees and Shrubs* by Alma C. Guillet. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1962.

