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FRUIT GARDENER

California Rare Fruit Growers



Year of the Jujube Continues
Have You Tried Sapodilla?
Post-Harvest Treatment of Produce

The Sorb, *Sorbus domestica* L.

C.T. Kennedy

Those who attended our 1990 joint meeting of NAFEX and California Rare Fruit Growers at U.C. Davis, and took the tour to Sonoma and Mendocino counties of northern California, may have stopped in the late evening to visit the historic Gold Ridge Experimental Farm at Sebastopol. Timing did not allow a lengthy visit for anyone, and some missed out altogether, but Gold Ridge was the trial plot of fruit breeder Luther Burbank from 1901-1926. The old Burbank home in Santa Rosa is a popular tourist attraction, but 10 miles to the west, at Gold Ridge, was where most of the important Burbank fruit varieties were born.

Today there are still many rows of trees on the Gold Ridge farm, just as the breeder left them. Three such rows are of a strange tree species, obviously selected for its fruits, which was not readily identifiable by the current custodians of Gold Ridge, the Farm Committee of the Western Sonoma County Historical Society.

In 1987, I was alerted to the presence of an odd pome fruit species there by Patrick Schafer, and he was able to place it in the genus *Sorbus*. The specific identification came later that autumn, when the fruits matured. This proved to be the largest, if not only, planting of *Sorbus domestica* in North America.

Beware of Astringency

The fruits of *Sorbus domestica* resemble small yellow round apples or pears, for which they are usually mistaken; many of the "pears" recognized in Renaissance paintings, such as the famous garlands by Mantegna, are in fact the fruits of *Sorbus domestica*. The fruits are of typical pome fruit structure though the apex lacks the usual crown and concave basin of the apple, and instead sports a peculiar convex, chaffy button, characteristic of this pome fruit. There is a certain degree of russetting on the fruits of some trees. The fruits are solid, green and astringent while developing, then turn yellow at maturity—though still quite astringent—and finally brown and soft after another 10-15 days. This bletting typical of medlars is also neces-

sary to render the sorb palatable. A properly bletted fruit tastes of (hard) cider and chocolate pudding, with a fluid texture, unlike the rather mealy medlar. I definitely detect the presence of alcohol in this fruit; not just ethanol, but also the unusual and pleasantly aromatic hexadecanol, which gives the fruit much of its unique and powerful flavor. In Britain, the fruits of this tree must be brought under cover to blet properly like the medlar, but in the long, hot, dry autumn of Italy or California, it blets satisfactorily on the tree and if left unharvested, will separate from its stalk and splatter the ground. This is a first-rate fruit for "ambulatory consumption" rather than the dinner table and for polite company is better after transformation into a mousse or the like. It was a classic flavoring for fruit ices and, in its French form "sorbet," gave its name to our "sherbets."

A Built-In Preservative

The fruits blet over a long period of weeks, and remain in quite edible condition for many days, and this may be attributed to its internal chemistry. Sorbs contain sorbic acid, which is its own built-in preservative! We consume sorbic acid in its food preservative forms Polysorbate 80 and potassium sorbate. Sorbitol is its char-

acteristic sugar, and is readily metabolized by diabetics.

Nomenclature of this fruit is sadly confused. In post-Shakespearean English, both fruit and tree were properly known as "sorb," cognate with its French names sorbe/sorbier and Italian sorbo. But as the population has retreated to the cities and away from contact with the land, few persons refer to this fruit at all, and its name, much like the fruit itself, may now be said to be extinct in English-speaking countries. The word sorb has come to be confused, and applied to the rowan, whitebeam, and even (in bastard form, service, pronounced "sarvis") to species of *Amelanchier* by the careless or ignorant, including many otherwise respectable authors.

At its center of diversity, in peninsular Italy, the sorb exists in a number of recognized forms. Those who appreciate the sorb speak of the mele settembrine, pere settembrine, mele ottobrino, pere ottobrino, and their respective attributes. The basic distinctions lie in the shape (pear or apple) and season (September or October). Whether these indications in Italian collections could be considered to identify true clones, generally distributed and propagated, is dubious. These names should be considered to describe the respective phenotypes.

In Italy the sorb is still esteemed,

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Todd Kennedy, former CRFG board member with a farm in San Martin, Calif. is a frequent contributor to the FRUIT GARDENER.



Size of mature sorb compared to man's hand. (Photo by Beth Madnick)

of apples by Elisabeth Dowle.

The second half of the book consists of the Directory of Apple Varieties. This includes descriptions (some minimal, some extensive) of the apple varieties in the Apple Collection at Brogdale in Kent. Cider and cider apples are also included; there are 27 pages of The Cider Story, and 72 cider varieties are described in the apple directory.

The appendices include short sections on Cooking with Apples, Growing Apples, and Further Information which includes the identity and location of various variety collections, fruit organizations and sources in the UK and other countries. There is an excellent reference list.

I purchased my copy from Pomona Book Exchange (Rockton, Ontario, LOR 1XO) for \$35. It is now available in U.S. bookstores or can be ordered directly from the U.S. distributor (Trafalgar Square, Box 257, North Pomfret, VT 05053; 1-800-423-4525; Visa, MasterCard) for \$29.95. □

VEGETABLES (continued from page 18)

sive—guavas, sapotes, pepinos, quince, persimmons, feijoas, cacti, herbs, honey, and dozens of vegetables are discussed.

A Reader Writes About Snails and Slugs

Steve Berger of Los Angeles sent me his recipe for snail control; he writes: "In previous years to eliminate the problem of snails and slugs, I have spread crushed egg shells and diatomaceous earth, never achieving completely satisfactory results. Two years ago, however, I tried a very simple and no-cost method to eliminate the pests.

"After the seeds have sprouted or after setting out transplants, I will go out to the garden in the morning when the grounds are still wet, and holding a pair of long sharp scissors, begin a counterattack by slicing the slugs and snails into halves (it is permissible to close your eyes before cutting). The hunt lasts for five minutes, and within two weeks' time, the snail and slug population should be close to extinct." □

Vegetable Patch welcomes reports and ideas from FRUIT GARDENER readers. Write to Ed Hager, 641 Calle Yucca, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360.

SORBUS (continued from page 19)

though by an ever more limited number of persons, and may now be considered a luxury fruit. Its value for purchasers seems to be chiefly sentimental, as a reminder of an ancestral simpler life in the countryside. Much as we do in America with the fig, quince and mulberry, Italians will plant the sorb in their gardens rather than look for it in the markets. Thus it does not appear in usual commerce, though it can be found, in season, at some expensive specialist fruitiers who get them from a very few growers or collectors in the countryside. A few wholesale nurseries in Italy propagate the sorb, but it is not sold in named forms, and year-old trees can be found in certain garden centers. It is probably best propagated on the *Sorbus domestica* seedling itself. When propagated on quince, it makes a weak union; perhaps hawthorn or pear would be an alternative rootstock.

The sorb grove at Gold Ridge was planted in three more or less solid rows, all of which exhibit the same characteristics: oblate, russeted green fruits maturing to yellow, highly astringent and very abundant but late ripening. Some of the trees are so late in fact that they could be said to never mature a palatable fruit. Nearby are scattered sorb trees that generally do ripen fruits of greater or lesser palatability, and of various forms. At least one is outstanding in production and fruit quality. I suspect that these scattered trees represent progeny from seed imported by Burbank; those in the three dense rows may be a swarm of F₂ from the older trees, or more or less identical seedlings from a later importation, perhaps all from one parent tree.

The one outstanding tree is distant from the others and holds a place of honor near the supervisor's lodge; this I take to be a grafted tree, from scions imported, perhaps from Italy, though no sign of graft union is visible. □

Ed. note: A companion article by Mark Albert, who has gathered propagating material of the best sorbs, will appear in the August FRUIT GARDENER.

SAPODILLA REFERENCES

(from page 17)

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Roger and Shirley Meyer

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