VanDusen Botanical Garden
5251 Oak Street
Vancouver, B.C.

Tree of the Month

Medlar (*Mespilus*)

Division, Magnoliophyta;class, Magnoliopsida; order, Rosales; family, Rosaceae; subfamily, Maloideae; genus, Mespilus

Have you ever eaten a fruit that has “bletted”? Do you know what “bletted” means?
In his 1832 book An Introduction to Botany, John Lindley, a British botanist, described how fruit “undergo a new kind of alteration; their flesh either rots or blets” before they become edible. This term comes from the French word “blettir” with means “to make soft”. Among fruits that display this unusual characteristic are rowanberries, persimmons and medlars.

Medlars are found naturally along the Black Sea Coast of Turkey, Asia Minor, Caucasus and Northern Iran where they are still appreciated. In the rest of the world, however, they are neglected and almost forgotten. It wasn't always so, however. Their history spans around 30 centuries. They may have been grown by Assyrians and Babylonians. The Greeks and Romans definitely cultivated them from C2 BCE. Pliny makes reference to drinks made with medlar fruit. Persians also grew them for centuries. They were popular in England during the 17th and 18th centuries and during the Victorian era. Writers such as Chaucer, Shakespeare and Cervantes made literary reference to medlars. And up until about a century ago, it would not have been unusual to have medlar fruit for dessert.

The common name, medlar, comes from the Middle English “medler”,and the Old French, “medle”, meaning “fruit from the medler”. The nomenclature *Mespilus* stems from the Late Latin, “mespila” and Greek “mespile” . The genus *Mespilus* contains only two species, namely *Mespilus germanica* from SE Europe and SW Asia and the *Mespilus canescens,* commonly known as Stern's Medlar and discovered in North America in 1990. The former is the one that will be focused on in this article. The latter occurs naturally in Arkansas where it is categorized as “critically imperilled” or “at a high risk of extinction due to extreme rarity.” What is sometimes called the Japanese Medlar and was once thought to be closely related to *Mespilus germanica*, is actually a loquat. Pears and hawthorns are closer relations of medlars.

The medlar tree is deciduous and requires a temperate climate, adequate water during dry spells, well-drained soil and shelter from strong winds. It prefers forests, thickets and wood margins. Medlars are slow growing and have rather hard wood. In earlier times their wood was used to make clubs, fighting sticks and spear points. Later on, it was used to make parts for windmills. Characteristically, medlars develop gnarled branches, which even when young, give the tree an ancient appearance. The bark starts off as gray-brown and smooth but begins to crack into thin plates over the years, revealing an orange-brown bark layer underneath. In the wild, tree shoots are often thorny. Leaves are elliptical or oblong in shape and hairy in texture. Their dark green turns russet in fall. Large, single, unperfumed white flowers appearing singly on short stalks in the early summer (and sometimes again later in the summer) are pollinated by bees. As interesting and lovely as these characteristics are, it is the fruit that intrigues us. Rounded and flat-topped, it is fleshy, brown and crowned with persistent sepals. It lingers on the tips of main shoots and side-growths well into fall, waiting for the first frosts to make its flesh edible by softening it and building up an increase in sugar

content. In this way it becomes “bletted”! And once the outer skin develops wrinkles and turns dark brown, the inside becomes like apple sauce and is ready to be consumed. If waiting for a frost is not practical, fruit can also be picked and stored by dipping it into a strong salt solution (to control fungi) and laying it with sepals down, in single layers for a few weeks in a cool place.

And how best to eat this fruit? Raw with cheese makes a good dessert. Fruit pulp mixed with eggs and butter makes “medlar cheese” resembling lemon curd. An abundance of pectin makes the fruit perfect for jellies. And how about medlar wine? In Russia, medlars are still used to make liqueurs. Moreover, in Orleans, France, a special drink called cotignac made from medlar fruit was traditionally presented to the sovereign upon entering the city. Joan of Arc is supposed to have been offered this as well. But the easiest way to eat the fruit is to poke a hole in the skin and suck or spoon out the flesh. But be careful not to eat too many of the peppercorn-like seeds. They contain a toxin known as hydrocyanic acid (which also gives bitter almonds their flavour).

Which brings us to the topic of whether medlars have any health benefits. Apparently the fruits contain small amounts of vitamins, particularly thiamine and ascorbic acid. The fruit pulp is also considered a laxative. The leaves are astringent and extracts have been an ingredient in mouth and throat washes. The bark has been used, though not reliably, as a quinine substitute.

This is a fruit tree with a notable history and many unique qualities. It may not be as popular as in the past, but hopefully we can admire it with a new sense of respect. And should you wish to grow this interesting tree, VanDusen may still have medlar seeds for sale! Check on our website or with the guides at the Guide Desk.

(Comments on what the fruit tastes like: “similar to that of a pear”, “much like applesauce”, “tastes like mud with sand in it”!)

To find this tree, proceed left off the deck down the ramp. Walk to the lake and turn left by the Japanese Maples. Walk along the edge of the lake to the black sign marked “Tree of the Month”.