

Plum Crazy (and Nutty) on Willowood Road. Julian Campbell (859 229 7711), 12 Apr 2019
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Have you ever wondered how expressions like plum crazy, plummy, nuts or nutty came to be? I imagine it has something to do with fruits and nuts being part of our ancient human food-heritage. And when we yearn for return to that primordial nature, leaving the hubub of modern life, we can sometimes seem excessively gleeful, eccentric or even crazy to consumers of more civilized foods.

Anyway, that is my excuse for promoting native fruits and nuts in the “Gainesway Greenway” on Willowood Road. About 15 years ago, the five house-lots here were bought out by the city and the area was converted to a greenway, due to persistent flooding and the need to provide space for future sewer work. The neighborhood association, led by Diana Rast, then got a grant to improve the riparian corridor by removing invasive bush honeysuckle and planting native plants. I worked on this project and also donated extra material, including the row of plums along the sidewalk and some additional shellbark hickories.

The plum collection here is unique—the species is midwestern “red plum” or “goose plum” (*Prunus munsoniana*), and should not be confused with the much more common American plum (*P. americana*). This red plum is a small shrubby tree that was an important feature of the human landscape before Virginian settlement. It originated in and around Missouri, but became spread to glades and villages elsewhere in eastern North America by migrating animals, native peoples, and early settlers. However, it was never bred into cultivars for modern commerce, and it became largely forgotten in the horticultural world. Yet around Kentucky, you will sometimes come across old trees and thickets, often in or near abandoned gardens. And you will sometimes meet old-timers who recall being fed, by their wise mothers, all kinds of wonderful foods made from these plums. These plums are truly sweet and delicious when fully ripe, unlike the relatively sour American plum. They can be preserved in various ways, and I even made some great vinegar from them.



Neighborhood volunteers helping develop the turfed edge of the plum collection in 2015.

This red plum and its close southern relative—the Chickasaw plum (*P. angustifolia*)—are presumably the plums referred to in the chronicles of DeSoto’s military exploration across southeastern North America during 1539-41. They consistently found plums around villages, with large quantities of the dried fruits often stored. The “Gentleman of Elvas” stated: “The plums are of two kinds, red and gray... These are better than all the plums of Spain, and they make far better prunes of them.” The grays were probably American plums (*P. americana*), which are covered with a bluish-gray waxy bloom when fresh.

I have found a lot of variability in tree form, leaf size and shape, and fruit ripening date. The earliest, largest and best fruits are produced in late June to mid-July, on a tree from Delaney Ferry Road in Woodford County; it is number 7 in the row along Willowood Road (counting from the uphill side). With more observation, tasting, processing and growing these plums (from seeds or cuttings), we could learn a lot more about the potential value of this ancient crop. The small initial row along Willowood Road is about the only collection that I know of for this species. It will help us to compare clones, propagate from diverse seeds, and eventually select superior cultivars.

You may ask—why isn’t the University of Kentucky doing such work and developing related research? The Arboretum on Alumni Drive does indeed have another collection of this same species, along the northwest side behind the Greg Page Apartments. I helped establish that initial collection in 1986, when collecting for the university. I have also donated seed recently to the National Arboretum in Washington DC, where they had no prior examples of this species. The only active research program on native plums is a small operation by the USDA in Byron, Georgia. It just takes a long time for some good ideas to reach fruition!

Meanwhile, I have also been planting shellbark hickories, which make the largest nuts and were another important food source for native people. Dave Leonard recently helped me relocate a tree in the greenway, to save it from the sewer construction. Please contact me for more information.



This three inch diameter, 14 foot tall tree, is the largest hickory we have yet salvaged in Lexington.