Hawthorns

by Craig Huegel

The rose family includes some of the most favored flowering plants for the home landscape, as well as some of our favorite sources of fruit. The list includes roses, crabapples, plums, apples, pears, cherries, peaches, apricots, blackberries, and raspberries. The "roses" have an immense impact on our lives.

This group also is especially important to wildlife. Tender new growth is eagerly pruned by browsers such as rabbits and deer, the fruit often are the favorites of birds and mammals, and the often thorny branches of most species provide excellent cover for hiding and nesting. It is no wonder then that a great many members of the rose family have found their way into the nursery trade and into our home landscapes.

A few forgotten "roses", however, share the many positive attributes of their more-famous cousins, but generally have escaped attention. Without a doubt, the best of these are the hawthorns, members of the genus *Crataegus*.

Hawthorns (or haws, as they are often called) are an exceedingly complex group of trees and shrubs that have long confounded the efforts of plant taxonomists to place them into the neat compartments which we know as species. When C. S. Sargent wrote his comprehensive *Manual of the Trees of North America* around the turn of this century, he described more than 700 species of hawthorns. Today, many taxonomists concur that about 30 recognizable species exist in North America, though some still give estimates as high as 200 species. The confusion is due to several factors, including the tendency of hawthorns to hybridize with each other. Another is their ability to reproduce asexually by seed. By doing so, local populations with slightly unique characters and local hybrids can persist and spread, giving the appearance of being distinct species.

But despite their outward differences, the hawthorns share many characteristics. All are rather small, fast-growing, deciduous trees or shrubby trees with some degree of thorniness. The amount of thorniness is variable, both between and within species, and some are either thornless or nearly so. All species also exhibit a rather irregular growth form — perhaps not the type for those who want a "formal"-looking tree, but their irregularity gives them a lot of character that can be used to great effect in a landscape setting.

Hawthorns bloom in the spring, and a mature tree clothed in its mantle of white apple blossoms is as beautiful as any flowering crab or plum. In most hawthorns, the many flowers occur in small clusters, but a few commonly produce their flowers singly. The flowers are followed by many apple-like fruits (known as haws) that vary in size and hue, depending on the species. In most hawthorns, this flush of red to orange fruit color is striking. The fruits of some species also are tart, and excellent for making jellies.

Hawthorns are adapted to a variety of habitats, but are naturally found only in north and central Florida. Although some of the ten species native to Florida may prosper farther south, I know of no one who has experimented with this, but I recommend that it be done with some caution.

One other caution to their use anywhere is their susceptibility to cedar-apple rust. Like many members of the apple family, hawthorns suffer from this disease and they should not be planted near stands of red cedar (*Juniperus silicicola*) or other members of this genus. In all other respects, hawthorns are remarkably hardy and free from problems.

Despite their virtues, hawthorns are not widely available even within the native nursery trade. If you wish to give them a try, you likely will have to search some to find the species you want. I have tried to collect all of our native species for the native plant demonstration area at the Pinellas County Extension office, and that is a good place to see them up close. The following is a brief description of each species native to Florida.

Crataegus aestivalis.

Mayhaw is native to moist-soil habitats in north Florida, but it is adaptable to average soils and will grow well farther south. This 6-m (20-ft) tree is characterized by its grayish-white bark and narrow crown. The leaves generally are small, roundish, and slightly toothed, with some leaves exhibiting distinct lobes. The flowers occur in small clusters. Also known as "jellymaker", mayhaw produces the best fruit of all the hawthorns for making jelly, and a small trade exists in the South for their fruit. This species is moderately spiny, and the bright red, 8 mm (⅓-in) fruit ripens very early in the summer.

Crataegus crus-galli (syn. *C. pyracanthoides*).

Known both as cockspur and Wakulla haw, this very adaptable species is native to north and north-central Florida, mostly in moist-soil sites. It also is tolerant of alkaline soils. Cockspur haw rarely exceeds 6 m (20 ft), and has rather dark, often scaly bark and a broad, spreading crown. The leaves are elliptical and unlobed, finely toothed on the outer margin, and shiny, deep green in color. As its common name suggests, it also is armed with stout spines and these may reach 38 mm (1½ in) in length. This is not a plant to put near a walkway, but its beauty should not be left out of a landscape simply because of this. The small, white

flowers bloom in clusters, followed by 8 mm (⅓-in) fruits in the summer that often are rusty-orange in color.

Crataegus flava (syn. *C. floridana*, *C. lacrimata*).

Summer or yellow haw is a widely occurring and variable tree native to sandy, upland habitats throughout north and central Florida. Characterized by a crooked and weeping growth form, this 4.5- to 6-m (15–20 ft) tree is perhaps the most picturesque member of the genus. Summer haw is only slightly thorny. The leaves are broadly round, toothed on the outer margin, and often lobed. It has rather large flowers for this genus [often 8 mm (⅓ in) in diameter], and they occur as small clusters. The orange-red to yellowish fruits ripen in summer and are up to 20 mm (¾ in) in length. This species blooms

Drawings from ***Trees of Northern Florida****, Kurz & Godfrey.*

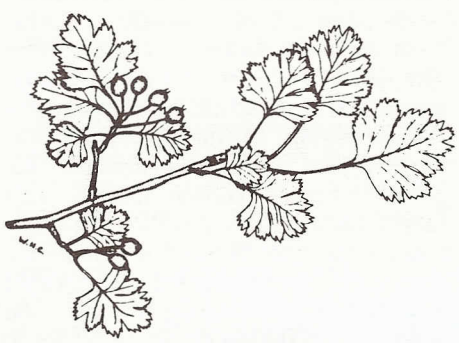
and produces fruit at an earlier age than most, often when only a few years old.

Crataegus lepida.

I go out on a limb somewhat in ascribing species status here, as most taxonomists have ignored the existence of this species. Scrub haw, as it has been called, is truly unique and likely quite rare. I have seen it only in deep-sand ridges of the central Florida scrubs, but it may occur elsewhere. Here it exists as an exceedingly crooked and thorny shrub, often multi-trunked, and rarely exceeding 2.5 m (8 ft) in height. Scrub haw is the last of the hawthorns to leaf out in the spring and the last to flower. The small flowers occur in small clusters and frequently do not appear until early summer, well after those of *C. flava*. The fruits ripen in late fall and are similar to those of *C. flava*, but are about half the size. Scrub haw requires well-drained soils and full sun, and makes an interesting addition to a xeric landscape.

Crataegus marshallii.

Parsley haw is a graceful 4.5- to 6-m (15–20 ft) tree native to moist woodland habitats in north and central Florida. Named for its distinct, finely dissected leaves that look similar to parsley, this haw also is characterized by its smooth,



light-colored bark and its often irregular, rounded crown. This species is only slightly thorny. Many clusters of small, white flowers in the spring are followed by an equally large number of 6 mm (¼-in), bright red fruits in the late fall. If the birds do not eat them first, these fruits remain on the tree into the winter after the leaves have fallen. This delicate haw is best planted in small groupings in a woodland setting where it will receive partial sun. It also does best in areas where it receives ample moisture.

Crataegus phaenopyrum.

Washington haw is one of the few hawthorns to be used nationwide with any frequency in civilized landscapes, but it is a rare member of Florida's flora and occurs in only scattered locations in the Panhandle. I have not had good success with this species using stock from other states, and I know of no source within Florida. This is regrettable because this is perhaps the most stately appearing member of this genus. Washington haw may reach 9 m (30 ft) in height, but often is closer to 6 m (20 ft). Its trunk is reasonably straight for a hawthorn and the crown is broad and spreading. It also has rather large leaves [up to 64 mm (2½ in) long], and they are shaped somewhat like those of the red maple (*Acer rubrum*). The clusters of large, showy flowers are followed in the fall by clusters of bright red, 8 mm (⅓-in) fruit. This species also has good fall color with the leaves turning scarlet red. Washington haw should be planted in fertile woodland soils.

Crataegus pulcherrima.

Beautiful haw is another species that is not recognized as distinct by all taxonomists, and it may be simply a variety of *C.*

flava, as it shares all of the noticeable physical features with it. I include it here in this discussion because several well-known authors of north Florida texts (e.g., Clewell and Godfrey) give it separate species status. This 6-m (20-ft) tree is native to north Florida where it occurs in open, upland woodland areas. I know of no commercial source for this hawthorn at this time, so its use will likely be restricted to those few north Florida residents willing to propagate it from the seed of wild specimens near them.

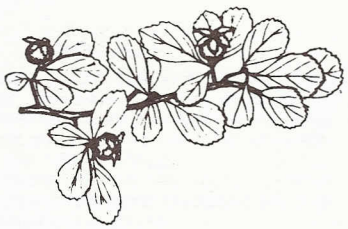
Crataegus spathulata.

Littlehip haw is another 6-m (20-ft) tree native to the moist woodlands of north and north-central Florida. Named for its small,

red fruit, this species shares many outward characteristics with *C. marshallii*. The leaves are not so finely dissected, however, and the outer bark frequently peels back naturally, exposing an attractive, copper-colored inner bark. Littlehip haw also is more drought tolerant than other haws, from my experience, which allows its use in a wider variety of settings. This attractive and graceful hawthorn is adaptable, once established, but is best used in a small grouping in a woodland setting where it will receive direct sunlight for only part of the day.

Crataegus uniflora.

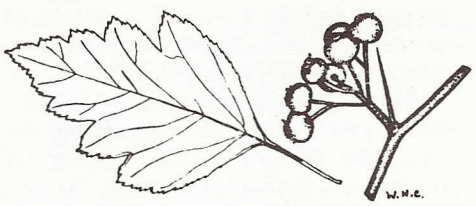
One-flowered haw is a drought-tolerant, shrubby tree that rarely exceeds 3 m (10 ft) in height. Native to well-drained, sandy uplands in north Florida, its name comes from the fact that its flowers are normally produced singly, and only rarely in



clusters. The leaves are similar to those of *C. flava*, and the branches often are armed with long, slender spines. Reddish fruits ripen in the fall and are about 13 mm (½ in) long. This is not a very showy member of the genus, but it makes an interesting addition to a xeric landscape in that region of the state where it occurs naturally.

Crataegus viridis.

Green haw is a slender graceful tree that may reach 9 m (30 ft) in height. It also has a wide, spreading crown. Native to moist soil habitats in north and central



Florida, this is an adaptable species that will thrive in an average-moisture setting once established. Leaves are somewhat similar to those of *C. phaenopyrum*, but smaller. Their sharply toothed margins and deeply notched lobes are attractive. The bark is whitish-gray and the branches are slightly spiny. Numerous clusters of small, white flowers are followed by clusters of small, round fruit that are usually orangish-red. This is probably the best of our native hawthorns for use as a specimen plant because of its size and form.

The hawthorns have much to offer the landscapes around where we live. Aesthetically, they provide both form and color that can rival many of the species that we more commonly use. Their varied growing requirements permit their use in nearly any landscape setting imaginable, and their value to birds and other wildlife is immense. Pursuing a hawthorn for your landscape setting will be time well spent. And when you find the one you're looking for, don't forget to thank the nursery owner who took the risk to raise it, knowing full well that the demand might never match the supply.

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