



Medlar

Mespilus germanica L.

Rosaceae

Species description

Medlars are small, wide-spreading and flat-topped trees. Wild varieties may have thorns. They have oblong to elongated leaves, entire or serrated on the margins and finely hairy underneath. The leaves turn russet to orange-red in fall. Medlar trees may be very long-lived (300+ years). Large, white to pink flowers appear singly in May and June. The fruit is round to oblate, brown, and must be ripened and bletted (for more on bletting, see Harvesting and Processing) to have soft flesh. Each fruit contains five large, stone-like seeds.



Natural and cultural history

Medlars are native to Europe, and perhaps originated in the Caucasus of Asia Minor. They grow in a wide range of temperate climate habitats, often at the edge of woodlands. The Assyrians first cultivated medlars and introduced them to Greece. The trees have been cultivated as an ornamental since Medieval times. Medlars are now a very minor fruit crop, cultivated in home gardens in eastern and southeastern Europe and Central Asia.

Planting considerations and propagation techniques

The trees grow 10-20 feet in height and width and can live for 50-300+ yrs. Medlar trees are susceptible to frost damage in areas with severe winters. Medlars prefer warm, sheltered, sunny locations but can be grown in partial shade. The trees should be grown in areas sheltered by buildings or other trees, as the leaves and flowers are easily damaged by strong winds.

Medlars may be drought resistant, depending on the rootstock. They are both insect-pollinated and self-pollinated. Medlars grow well in a wide range of soil types except for poorly drained or excessively dry soils. Rootstock choice can influence soil tolerance.

Propagate medlars by grafting scion or budwood onto rootstock. Seeds are rarely planted because they are slow to germinate and grow. Summer softwood cuttings can be rooted using rooting hormone and top misting. Medlars can be grafted onto medlar rootstock, but are more commonly grafted onto quince, hawthorn, or pear rootstock. Pear rootstocks tend to produce larger trees than quince or hawthorn rootstocks. Hawthorn rootstocks increase drought tolerance of medlars, while quince rootstocks are better suited for moist soils.

Water needs

Water requirements for medlars depend upon climate and growing conditions. Local temperature, humidity, and rainfall influence water needs, as do soil type and texture, soil organic matter, aspect, and the presence of mulch or cover crops. Medlars are not typically irrigated except in very dry climates. Quince rootstocks are not advised for drought-prone areas.

Care

Medlars are similar to apple trees in terms of fertilizer and water requirements. They generally have very low fertilizer requirements, and they are usually disease-free, but may suffer fire blight and powdery mildew. They should be pruned during the dormant season to remove dead and overlapping branches and to increase light penetration into the canopy. Medlars may be trained as bushes or small trees, depending on the space.

Harvesting and processing

Medlar fruits need a very long growing season to mature and are harvested in October-November while fruits are still hard, and then allowed to soften. Fruits are traditionally bletted before being eaten. Bletting is an over-ripening that breaks down tanins and acids, softens the flesh, decreases astringency, and increases sugars. Mature fruit will blet and be ready to eat 2-4 weeks after harvest. The fruit should be stored on straw. The fruits are traditionally eaten by sucking or spooning out the over-ripe pulp and leaving skin and seeds behind. They may also be baked whole or stewed with butter, roasted, or processed into jellies, preserves and syrups.

References and resources

Plants for a Future (PFAF). n.d. *Mespilus germanica* - L.

<http://www.pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Mespilus+germanica>

Webster, T. 2008. *Mespilus germanica*, medlar, pp. 674-678. Eds. Janick, J. and R.E. Paull. *The Encyclopedia of Fruit and Nuts*. CABI Publishing, Cambridge, MA.