

WHS Plant Notes for November 2012

Disanthus cercidifolia (Hamamelidaceae) Redbud Hazel

Grown by Jon Craig in Corralitos: Probably most of us had never even heard of this good-looking shrub before Jon introduced it to us. It's native to mountain woodlands of Japan and China, where it's reported to be endangered. It's rather slow growing and matures as a multi-stemmed shrub about 10 ft tall and wide with slender, gray-brown branchlets. It naturally develops a graceful vase shape and needs little or no pruning except to remove dead or crossing branches. As the species name says, its beautiful leaves have the same broad heart shape as *Cercis*. They're about 4 ½ in. across, blue green and held on long, pink petioles. Their fall color is spectacular. This is one of the few shrubs that develops great red color in shade. The brilliant display of deep burgundy, bright crimson, orange and gold tones begins in early fall and lasts a month or more. It flowers at the same time, although you're not likely to notice unless you make a point of looking for them. They resemble small, dark red starfish and Jon says they have a slight medicinal fragrance. It's reported to tolerate sandy soil and clay soil if it drains well, but it prefers moist, forest soil and dappled or light shade. In other words, pick a site where a rhododendron would be happy.

Jon also brought *D. c.* '**Ena Nishiki**', a very rarely seen cultivar whose leaves have an irregular margin of bright creamy white. The leaves are also a little smaller, measuring about 3 in. across. They develop the same spectacular fall colors but framed by creamy white. 'Ena Nishiki' occurred as a chance seedling in a garden in Japan and was originally given the cultivar name 'Seiju Yamaguchi' after the grower who discovered it. It was just granted a US patent in 2003.

Solanum muricatum (Solanaceae) Cachum, Melon Pear, Pepino, Pepino Dulce

Grown by Katie Wong in Los Altos: The pepino is an ancient fruit that's making a comeback. It has become a specialty fruit grown for export in New Zealand, Chile and Australia. It's also grown commercially along California's central coast. But it was developed as a cultivated crop thousands of years ago in the Andes, with its origin most likely centered in the area of southern Colombia and northern Ecuador. It is known only as a cultivated crop—no wild ancestral form has ever been found although three wild species have been fingered for possible involvement.

When the Spanish arrived in South America, pepinos were an important crop being grown from Colombia into Chile. It was the Spanish who called it pepino (cucumber); in indigenous Quechua it was called cachum. Andean farmers were growing regionally adapted pepinos in an amazing array of sizes, shapes and colors. The modern, commercial varieties generally have fruit that's somewhat egg-shaped and a little larger than an extra-large egg with smooth, thin, creamy yellow skin streaked with purple. The flesh ranges from white to greenish to apricot. There is a relatively small central seed cavity. Good quality, ripe fruit is described as juicy, moderately sweet, with a scent and refreshing flavor similar to a honeydew melon with a bit of cucumber. Fruit that's not fully ripe tastes more cucumber-like and can be used as a substitute for them. Flavor and sweetness is best if the fruit is allowed to ripen on the vine. It will keep for a couple of

weeks on your counter or up to 4 weeks stored at about 41 to 46°F. Temperatures below 41°F cause severe discoloration of the skin and flesh. It's an evergreen subshrub with a woody base and grows about 4 ft tall by several ft wide, similar to an indeterminate tomato. Growers usually stake or cage it. It will grow in full sun or some shade, in any soil and performs best with cool nights and mild days. It needs regular irrigation and, since it has a shallow spreading root system, grows best with overhead sprinkling or microjets rather than with trickle emitters. High nitrogen fertilizer stimulates rampant vegetative growth that reduces fruit set. Flower and fruit development are very temperature sensitive and different varieties often have their own narrow temperature requirements. Fruit set won't happen if night temperatures are too low and daytime temperatures that are above about 85°F cause the flowers to abort and loss of pollen viability and will negatively effect the quality of developing fruit. They are perennial and hardy down to about 27°F.

A lot of that ancient Andean genetic diversity is still present so they don't come true from seeds. When you find a variety you like and that grows well for you, it will have to be propagated from cuttings. Cuttings are taken just after harvest is over and will root very quickly, within 10 to 15 days. If you're tempted to try pepinos, 'Miski Prolific' sounds like good choice for our area. It originated in Nancy Garrison's garden in San Jose and is a seedling of 'Miski', a New Zealand cultivar. It's a strong-growing plant that bears well without pollination and therefore has few to no seeds. The fruit matures early and is described as being creamy white with a faint salmon glow and lightly striped with purple. It has deep salmon flesh that has a rich, sweet flavor and aroma. Sounds wonderful, but I don't know how to get my hands on one.

~Jackie Doda