

Conservation Corner

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The Moon has been outshining itself recently as last week brought us a super moon, blue moon, and blood moon – all at the same time! Perhaps you were fortunate enough to live in an area that wasn't under cloud cover at the time of the lunar eclipse last Wednesday. Naturally, as I drove to work the following morning, the moon was shining brightly in all its splendor upon the frozen fields. Once again, a day late and a dollar short.

Here at Conservation, tree season is starting to shine, and many farmers and residents have stopped by to order trees and shrubs for spring plantings. We also offer a variety of fruit trees, including two apricot cultivars from the University of Minnesota with the apt names 'Moongold' and 'Sungold.' Time to encounter the apricot tree.

Apricots belong to the genus *Prunus* along with plums, cherries, peaches, nectarines, and almonds. Perhaps you know them as the stone fruits. Apricots, *Prunus armeniaca*, are believed to have originated in China where they were important in medicine. In fact, some physicians required no payment except the planting of an apricot tree in their orchards.

Apricots were carried along ancient trade routes to Armenia and Greece where they became known as "golden eggs of the sun." Thousands of years later, courtesy of the Columbian Exchange, apricots arrived on both coasts of the New World. Spanish missionaries carried apricot seedlings to the West Coast, while English settlers first brought apricots to Virginia in 1720. Today California, with its Mediterranean climate, is our major producer of apricots.

Apricot trees are small in size, 10-15 feet in height, with drupe fruits similar to small peaches. The fruit is yellow to orange in color and sweet to tart in taste. Most modern cultivars are grafted onto plum or peach rootstocks. Some varieties are self-fruitful while others require a pollinator. 'Moongold' and 'Sungold' must be planted in pairs to ensure fruit production.

The trickiest part in growing apricots and other stone fruits stems from the fact that they bloom early in the spring. As you know, Iowa spring weather can fluctuate widely, and warm days followed by cold, frosty nights are the biggest enemy of stone fruits. Their delicate flowers are easily frozen and the whole season's fruit crop may be lost in a single night. But, on the plus side, apricot trees are relatively easy to grow and manage. And while they may not produce fruit every year, if you enjoy apricots it's worth the gamble as in the years you do get fruit you will get a lot of it.

And what's not to enjoy about sun-ripened apricots? They're delicious served fresh, in sauces and jams, or distilled into apricot brandies and liqueurs. Dried apricots are especially chewy and tasty – we add them to our favorite trail mixes for color as well as Vitamins A & E, potassium, and iron.

A closing reminder – don't be a day late and a dollar short come spring. Order an apricot tree today!

