

Yogurt's lessons on nativars

By Janet Allen

Back in the late 20th century, Americans discovered yogurt and its health benefits. But it was a bit too tart for the American palate. The solution? Add sugars and flavorings. Manufacturers added not just fruit, but jam; not just a sprinkling of nuts, but bits of candy; not just flavors from real food, but artificial flavorings and unnatural colors.

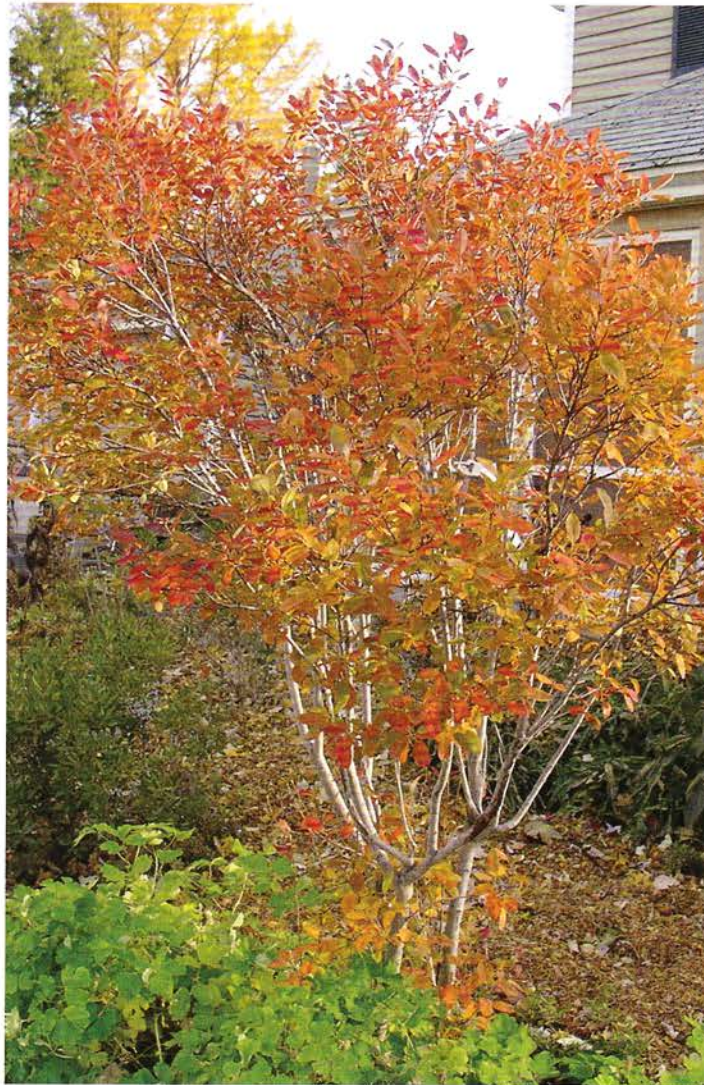
Today, grocery stores devote a whole wall of the dairy section to the many varieties of sweetened yogurt. Want just plain yogurt? It's there, but you'll have to search for it.

We've turned what had been an ancient, health-sustaining food into just another unhealthy dessert. Yet it's a dessert we feel virtuous in eating. After all, it's yogurt, right?

But why am I writing about food in a plant journal? Because we're doing to plants what we've done to yogurt and other foods. We're taking life-sustaining "plain" plants — our native species — and "sweetening" them beyond recognition. Novelty-seeking humans like lots of extra petals, unnaturally garish colors and fewer "messy" berries. Industrial horticulture has flooded conventional nurseries with these profitable creations.

We know that excess sugar doesn't support human health, and we're now finding that many cultivars of native plants — known as nativars — don't provide healthy food for wildlife or the benefits of genetic diversity.

Does it matter that a plant is technically native if it has so many petals a bee can't reach the nectar? That its nectar guides — invisible to people, but essential cues for pollinators — have disappeared in our race to create novel colors? That flowers haven't produced seeds birds need in fall and winter?



You find out what's in your yogurt by reading the label, and you can identify nativars by reading plant labels. The serviceberry nativar in this photo is labeled *Amelanchier canadensis* 'Glenn Form.' The scientific name, *Amelanchier canadensis* is italicized and represents the genus and the species. 'Glenn Form' represents the cultivar name. It's written in regular type and is bounded by single quotation marks. As the Missouri Botanical Garden points out in its description of this cultivar, "Less than 10 percent of the flowers produce mature fruit." Sorry, birds. Were you expecting the usual serviceberry feast? This plant is for decoration only.

But as with eating yogurt, we have a virtuous feeling when we plant a nativar. After all, it's native, right? People who have chosen to eat unprocessed foods have been rewarded with better health. Many even discover that their taste buds adapt and formerly favorite foods now taste sickeningly sweet. Our reeducated taste buds can actually enjoy the clean taste of simple yogurt, a piece of fresh fruit or a simple vegetable dish.

We can similarly rethink our choice of planting nativars. Sure, just as occasionally indulging in a dessert-y yogurt won't destroy our health, planting an occasional nativar (especially one similar to the species) won't destroy all the benefits of a natural landscape. But we can reeducate our horticultural "taste buds" and come to appreciate the simple elegance of the species, the variations we see in plants when they reseed, the charm of subtler colors.

Even more, we can revel in the life native species support. We can enjoy watching a bee zeroing in on a nectar-rich flower

or a bird devouring nutritious seeds left to overwinter on spent stalks. We can hope that some of the genetically varied seedlings our species produce will be able to adapt to a changing climate or survive attacks by exotic pests and diseases.

In an increasingly industrialized society and threatened environment, we can know that we're doing one of the most important things an individual can do to support life on earth: planting native species.

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