

TRADITIONAL PLUMS OF EASTERN QUÉBEC

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After reading John Bunker's thoughts on growing plums (Summer 1996), I thought I ought to write to tell him about the plums that are grown in this area. However, after rereading the first draft of my letter, I realized this could be of general interest and decided to change the letter into a Pomona article.

At the beginning of the present century, most of the plums grown in Eastern Québec were of the European type. Santerre (1904) gives the names of 27 varieties that were grown since 1860 in Village des Aulnaies, some 30 miles East of Québec City, and Léopold (1914) mentions a dozen names of the varieties known to perform well in Eastern Québec. Among the better varieties mentioned were: Damas bleu (Blue Damson), Coe's Golden Drop, Reine-Claude (a couple of varieties), Moor's Arctic, Lombard, Mirabelle, Guii. Both authors say that it is useless to try to plant Japanese plums such as Burbank and Abundance because of insufficient hardiness. Also, they do not recommend the better known European varieties such as the Italian Blue for the same reason (after a few unsuccessful trials, I must admit these recommendations were justified). At that time, the hybrids and the hardier Japanese plums were not known.

So plums have been grown for a long time in Eastern Québec, but there are very few if any commercial orchards. Sometimes, at the market, we can find some local plums for sale, but never in large quantities. The farmers that sell them usually have only a few trees. But plum trees are often grown in private properties and many farms have a few trees. According to Léopold, the soils of the Saint Lawrence River valley are very good for the plums and, if the climate is a bit cold, there are excellent varieties that are hardy enough.

Today, we can find plum trees in Ile d'Orléans, a large rural island close to Québec City which is an important apple production area, on the Côte de Beaupré, in the county of Charlevoix on the North side of the Saint Lawrence River (this includes Ile aux Coudres, La Malbaie and Baie Saint Paul), and on the plains of the South side of the River, from Québec up to Rimouski. All these areas are in climatic zone 4. However, we find very few of those varieties mentioned by the two aforementioned authors. Following is a description of the varieties that I have seen growing in the area.

The most common plum we find is usually called Damas bleu (Blue Damson), although I'm not sure it really is a Damson plum because these are not generally considered very hardy. It could however be a strain that got well adapted and was subsequently propagated. My father calls this plum Prune de l'Île because there were a lot of them on Ile D'Orléans when he was young. Others simply call it Prune du pays (local plum). Santerre mentions that, at that time (in 1903), the Damas bleu was already well known and widely grown. We don't usually find grafted trees of this variety, it is mostly propagated by suckers taken near the base of existing trees. It is seldom seen in nurseries and most people that have a tree got it from a friend. It is also quite obvious that, through the time, some natural seedlings must have occurred, but these must be identical (or almost) with the parent trees. This tree sends suckers very freely - most adult trees look more like bushes than like a fruit tree. The fruit has the general shape and color of the Italian Blue, except that it is much smaller: typically a bit less than an inch long by about 5/8 wide. When picked well ripe from the tree, it is really delicious. It doesn't keep long however. The tree is perfectly hardy in zone 4 and probably good for a try in zone 3.

The other most common plum around is the Mont-Royal. It is of the European type and was discovered in the area of Montréal in the beginning of the century. It probably appeared as a chance seedling. Léopold mentions it in his book as good for the Montréal area (which is in zone 5, thus warmer than Eastern Québec). Mont-Royal had just been discovered then and probably hadn't been tested in colder climates. Since that time, it has proven perfectly hardy in Eastern Québec. The variety is still a good seller in the nurseries as it is well known that it is one of the most reliable plums that can be planted in the area. The tree is self pollinating and hardy in warmer parts of zone 3. The fruit is round, sometimes slightly wider than high, same blue color as Damas bleu, and about 1-1/2 inch in diameter. The flesh is yellow, sweet and juicy, delicious. Productivity is very good.

Another plum that we find here and there is quite similar to Damas bleu as far as size and shape is concerned, except that the skin is yellow. When young, I used to call it "Gosses de moines" (I prefer not to translate this as it is not very nice). I have never been able to identify it but I think that a tree I bought a few years ago under the name Prunier blanc (White Plum) will turn out to be this variety - I'm still waiting for the first fruits. As in the case of Damas bleu, these trees are usually propagated by taking suckers at the base of mature trees. The

tree is quite hardy in zone 4 although there is sometimes a bit of winter kill on my prunier blanc on some long shoots of the previous year.

Finally, I will mention a plum I discovered last summer at a friend's property at La Malbaie (County of Charlevoix). I think it is a type of Reine-Claude or a Mirabelle: rather small, round, yellow with an orange-pink blush, very sweet and delicious. The trees were however in terrible shape, covered with black knots - impossible to take a single scion!

Naturally, nowadays, we find a lot of the newer hybrids and hardy japonaises in the nurseries, but I'm not yet convinced these are better than our traditional varieties. As everyone knows, pollination is often difficult, and productivity low. I know someone who bought a Brookred this spring ... without any pollinator. The salesperson at the nursery guaranteed it would fruit! I wouldn't bet on that. As a final word, I would highly recommend Mont-Royal to anyone who wishes to grow plums in a cold area. It is definitely my best plum tree. And it will give plenty of fruit even if it is the only plum tree miles around.

References:

Léopold, Réverend père (1914). "La culture fruitière dans la province de Québec", Institut agricole d'Oka, 2nd edition.

Santerre, Alec (1903). "De la culture des arbres et des arbustes fruitiers", Québec.