



## **Medlars with Maggie Campbell-Culver**

I want to call this talk 'Rotten to the Core', it's about the Medlar, and you will see why later.

'I was aware of the fairest Medlar tree  
That ever yet in all my life I see  
As full of blossoms as it might be...'

That was a poem written about 1450 and even then the *medlar* with its blooms was appreciated but from August onwards into October you will be able to see why the *medlar* tree has anciently been known throughout Europe as Dog's Arse. A most unrefined name but which succinctly describes the small brown apple shaped open eyed fruit with its calyx.

The *medlar* is a single species in its genus but is closely related to the hawthorn and the *Cotoneaster*. For a long time it was included not unnaturally in the pomaceae family or the apple family but was moved into the rose family during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It's believed to be a native of southern central Europe and the Caucasus and has the merit of being exceedingly hardy it grows wild over most of Europe. Its arrival in England is open to some conjecture but it is usually thought to be of one of the horticultural presents that the Romans left behind. In France during the 16<sup>th</sup> century we get the first indication of the *medlars'* usefulness when it is recommended in a French book of 1570 entitled *Maison Rustique* about planting a hedge. The contents are as sensible today as they were over 400 years ago. Hazel trees, gooseberry bushes, white and red currants, eglantines (those are sweet briars), brambles, woodbine (that's honeysuckle), the hollies, elder trees and then intermingled now and then with white thorn, wild apple trees and apples of paradise (those are quince), service trees and *medlars*.

The *medlar* is one of those intriguing trees that obligingly fits in anywhere. Undemandingly found as we have seen, growing in hedges, planted in orchards for its fruit with other more glamorous persona, as a charming middle-sized tree to decorate the garden. The fruit is, like its dog arse name, singularly unprepossessing. This is usually picked unripe and then allowed to blet or soften. That's from the French word *blettière* meaning sleepy fruit and first used in England about 1835 by John Lindley who was the then secretary of the RHS, however, William Cobbett, the writer and rather ascerbic personality, described the fruit as only one degree better than a rotten apple.

No one has found much to do with them either unripe or bletted except to make a delicious jelly as an accompaniment for meat or cheese. *Medlar* aficionados who have eaten them sometimes with sugar find them 'acidly

aromatic'. Florence Sippit, my husband's maternal grandmother, grew them and very much enjoyed the fruit. Long before then there were several medical recommendations to the efficacy of it too. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Nicholas Culpeper recommended 'dried seeds been ground up into powder added to wine, enough to make a drink, wherein some parsley roots are infused all night, it helps break the stone in the kidneys and helps to expel it'. William Coles in 1647 believed that a wound healed faster if the chopped leaves of the *medlar* were applied to staunch the bleeding.

The *medlar* and its fruit suffers from benign neglect and as a relic of a bygone age little development has been done to improve the fruit or to develop recipes. RHS Plant Finder lists only some 7 varieties apart from the species.

The tree itself looks delightfully old fashioned and is a perfect tree to plant in a small garden. Just think of its merits. It reaches a maximum height of only about 6 metres which is 20 feet with a spread of about 8 metres, 25 feet. It is agreeably architectural. The leaves, which are large and hairy, turn a warm russet colour in autumn and the large bowl shaped white flowers are born singly during May and June followed by the fruit in October. *Medlars* too are very well behaved. Maintenance is minimal, pruning is group one, almost secateur free. The tree is long lived it will probably outlive you and what more could one want?

Why not make 2012 the year to plant a *medlar*? If nothing else, it will give the garden historian something to think about in 2111. Perhaps by then we shall all be eating medlar mousse and drinking medlar smoothies and Brittany could perhaps host a Medlar Fest.

