

# A loquat conundrum

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The loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*; Fig. 1–3) is the best-known species in a rosaceous genus of about 20 evergreen trees and shrubs indigenous to warm-temperate and subtropical regions of Asia and the Himalaya.



**Fig. 1** Botanical illustration of *Eriobotrya japonica* (Thunb.) Lindl. [then as *Mespilus japonica* Thunb.] showing leaves, flowers and fruit. From *Botanical Register*, Vol. 5, Tab. 365 (1819) [S. Edwards]. Image courtesy Missouri Botanical Garden, [www.botanicus.org](http://www.botanicus.org).

Despite its specific name, *japonica*, the loquat is thought to have originated in south-eastern China but has been widely cultivated for its fruit in Japan for centuries. Today, it is distributed in gardens and orchards throughout the warm-temperate and subtropical areas of the world, either as a fruit tree or as a garden ornamental cultivated for its bold, leathery, deep green foliage.

However, it is not confined to subtropical climates. What is less well known about this handsome small evergreen tree is that while it may not flower and fruit readily in cold climates, its wood and foliage are frost hardy down to at least  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  throughout lowland New Zealand<sup>2</sup>. This makes it an ideal small tree to add a touch of subtropical lushness to a temperate garden.

The tree in my garden at 160 m asl in Central Canterbury, in a frost pocket, is evidence of this. As a gift from a friend who raised it from seed that he collected in his late mother's Auckland garden about 20 years ago, it has continued to grow steadily, without any obvious check, through two decades of inland Canterbury winters. It has been untroubled by the severe frosts of 2002 (which destroyed a potato crop stored inside a closed shed), major snow dumps in June 2006 and 2012, and the destructive September gales of 2013.

It is now an attractive small tree about five metres tall with a clear trunk of about 1.5 metres and a rounded, spreading mop-head of 20 cm long, leathery, dark green leaves. Although its lower branches and trunk are sheltered by a privet hedge and other trees and shrubs, its crown is exposed to both hot, dry north-westerly winds and icy southerlies, neither of which has caused any obvious harm. Clearly, it is a happy tree in a cold climate.

However, the tree has not been free from tribulations over the years. There are two major ones: (a) a lack of flowers and fruit, and (b) a lack of clues to what triggers flowering, which has happened only twice in its two decades. On both occasions, the flowers have appeared out of season, in spring rather than in autumn when nearly every article written about the loquat indicates they should appear.

Another cold-climate loquat specimen is growing in the car-park adjacent to the Ashburton Domain (Fig. 2). This specimen lacks a distinct trunk and its growth habit as a result is shrubby, with multiple stems (Fig. 2A). I often used to stop and eat lunch alongside it on my late-autumn trips to acquire new rhododendrons and camellias from Jordan's Nursery, since closed. There were always flowers on it in May. Although Ashburton enjoys a marginally milder climate than my garden, I don't believe the difference is sufficient to trigger a change of flowering season.



**Fig. 2** Loquat growing in the Ashburton Domain, in Mid-Canterbury, November 1, 2013. **A**, specimen showing a multi-stemmed, shrubby habit of growth. **B**, young fruit beginning to swell. Photos: Derrick Rooney.

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<sup>2</sup> *Botanica's Trees and Shrubs*, published by Random House (2001), rates the loquat as hardy to US Zone 9 ( $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$ ). Most of Canterbury is Zone 8A (from  $-17.8^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$ ).

This year (2013) flowers suddenly appeared all over my tree in late August after an unusually mild, frost-free spell of late-winter weather that had crocuses, snowdrops, and early rhododendrons and camellias flowering a month or more earlier than usual. The loquat's flowering was interrupted in early September, after spring had officially begun, by an unusually severe run of frosts which also wiped out all the plum and apricot flowers, and restored other spring flowers to their regular time frame. The loquat resumed flowering during a milder spell in mid-September. The photograph, taken on the second-last day of the month, shows a tail-end flower still hanging on (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** Loquat tree in flower in the author's garden, September 29, 2013. Photo: Derrick Rooney.

Loquat flowers are white and thick-textured, somewhat resembling those of pears or medlars, to which they are related (it has sometimes been called Japanese medlar), but in furry spikes rather than loose clusters. They are sweetly scented, and on a still, mild morning the fragrance fills the air for many metres around the tree. If I could persuade the tree to flower regularly, the scent alone would justify the space it occupies.

The fruit (Fig. 4) has been variously described as insipid, sharp, and tangy. When eaten fresh, it has been called refreshing and juicy, with a melon-like texture and a sweet flavour hinting at peaches, apricots, and citrus. Sir Joseph Banks considered loquat fruit to be as good as mangoes.

Sadly, I am not in a position to confirm or deny any of these reports. At its first flowering back in 2011 my tree set only a few fruit, a phenomenon that is not unusual after the first flowerings of fruit-tree seedlings. Most of these fell off before ripening. The one remaining fruit, of which I had high hopes, nestled in the little furry calyx for several weeks, looking like a small, slowly expanding green crab-apple and slowly turning more yellow than green – then a blackbird took it.



**Fig. 4** Mature loquat fruit. Photo: 'Oldie', via <http://commons.wikimedia.org>, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.