SOME NOTES ABOUT MAYHAW POLLINATION

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A large majority of the favored mayhaw varieties in orchards are grafted clones of trees selected from the wild for certain outstanding characteristics. There are articles in this newsletter talking about characteristics and about how the names of these varieties came about. James Eave's 'Maxine' is a variety which is currently at the top of the list of most knowledgeable growers. Choosing varieties, placement, and spacing are some of the important questions facing a person starting an orchard or even someone planting just a few trees. Whatever choices are made on varieties, will become outdated. They bred the horns off some cows and turned others into unbelievable milk producers, so mayhaws trees, even though they aren't in the class with beef or milk, will surely improve greatly over time. The big improvement will come from cross-pollinization, in which people like Glen Melcher and Billy Craft are currently involved. From a view toward production, rather than improving varieties, pollination has some interesting questions. Most mayhaw varieties are believed to be self-pollinating. In one of his presentations at the Mayhaw Conference in 2007, Dr. John Pyzner pointed out that some varieties of mayhaws may not self-pollinate.

I believe that the G-2 'Spectacular' (one of the varieties Bobby Talbert discovered in the Gist Texas area) does not self-pollinate. I have a large number of 'Spectaculars' planted together on 20 foot spacing (I wish it was at least 25 feet), and these trees have given strong reason to believe that they will not pollinate themselves. The trees are five and six years old. Even though 'Spectaculars' are very early bloomers, only one year of their lives has there been a frost problem and that was not severe. So frost is not the reason for the problem I am about to describe. The trees have bloomed profusely since their transfer from the nursery, but each year (save 2008), the blooms have turned red and then dropped off without more than 3 or 4 fruit produced on any one tree. I took the remnants of the flowers to the Mayhaw Conference and generally sought explanations from every source I could find. No one mentioned lack of pollination as a possibility until Dr. Pyzner's comment in 2007.

To check and see if pollination was the problem, I, of course, needed a pollinator. I chose 'Elite' because it is a highly regarded variety with its only negative trait being early bloom date. Elmer Langston was adding a shed at Little Eden Orchards and was going to have to move a mature 'Elite' in the process. Elmer graciously offered me the tree and one fine December day in 2007 we moved it from Pollock to Monroe. I put the 'Elite' in the midst of 'Spectaculars' and waited for March. The 'Elite' bloomed as did all the 'Spectaculars' and the 'Spectaculars' put on fruit around the 'Elite' (which fruited as well) in a rather distinct pattern. The trees only 20 feet away in all directions set the highest percentage of fruit. The trees 20 feet further than the nearest group set a good bit of fruit, but it was less than half the fruit on the close trees. There was some fruit on trees as far as 50 feet away from the 'Elite,' but the percentage dropped

dramatically. The trees very remote from the ‘Elite’ set three or four berries as they had done for years.

The ‘Elite’ died in March before its fruit matured. The partial root system could not provide what the tree needed for leaves and maturing fruit. Before it departed, however, it answered my questions on the non-producing G-2's.

2008 was a poor year for bees. Several of the prior years in which our G-2's produced no fruit, were, however, years in which bees were abundant. Pollination by bees had not been the problem. It was the pollen itself. Would the distribution of fruit been greater and farther in 2008 with more bees? I think it surely would have been.

We had some G-2 production in 2009 with the pollinators we have been able to bring along in the orchard. This year should be improved from 2009 and the pollinators should be very far along, God willing, by 2011.

Of what use is this information? For one thing, G-2 ‘Spectacular’ is a very desirable mayhaw and if you plan to include some of them in your planting, it may be best to place them close to other early bloomers. Also placing varieties that bloom near the same time, close to each other may increase production in varieties which are erroneously thought to self-pollinate. Lastly, if you want ornamental mayhaws in your yard without having to deal with messy fruit, just plant G-2's by themselves.