

Prunus institia italica

[Synonyms : *Prunus domestica* var. *italica*, *Prunus domestica* var. *institia*, *Prunus domestica* var. *italica*, *Prunus italica*]

GREENGAGE is a tree. A variety of plum (*Prunus domestica*).

It is also known as *Ameixa caranguejeira* (Portuguese), *Ameixa rainha-cláudia* (Portuguese), *Cirueta claudia* (Spanish), *Edelpflaume* (German), *Gage*, *Gaujah* (Arabic), *Greengage plum*, *Prugna claudia* (Italian), *Prune de la reine Claude* (French), *Qing mei* (Chinese), *Rainha-cláudia* (Portuguese), *Regina claudia* (Italian), *Reina claudia* (Spanish), *Reine-Claude* (French), *Renklode* (German), *Renklod* (Russian), *Ringlotte* (German), *Rundpflaume* (German), and *Susino* (Italian).

Institia means ‘grafted or foreign’. *Italica* means ‘of or from Italy’.

The common name of the fruit of *Prunus institia italica* (greengage) probably commemorates (there are several William Gage’s) Sir William Gage (1666-1727) who first cultivated the fruit in England. He is believed to have been the grandfather of Sir Thomas Gage (1761 or 1781-1820) after whom the genus *Gagea* was named. The French name *Reine-Claude* commemorates the wife of Francis I who ruled France from 1515-1547. In the Loire Valley she grew the fruit in their castle grounds and the greengages which are still popular in France today are found in abundance in that area. Why the plum was named after Queen Claude however has provided plenty of food for speculation. Historians have noted the flamboyant, cultured and ruthless character of her husband and mused that he married her because she was Duchess of Brittany, a region France had long wished to control. Some have also noted that Queen Claude’s appearance offered little to commend her as she had not only inherited her mother’s limp but was also gross to the point that today one might suspect some serious glandular disorder. Thus social compliments from her courtiers would no doubt have been difficult to phrase. Explanations for this particular commemoration range through the generous and banal to the outright bawdy. Of the former some have suggested that the greengage honoured her in that it was the most luscious fruit in France. Of the latter cruel commentators have speculated that the plum has a prominent cleft on one side from stem to tip – reminiscent of the Queen’s buttocks.

It was not until 1724 that the plum-like, sometimes yellow-, purple- or red-flushed, green fruit crossed the Channel from France to Britain and its introduction then is owed to Sir William Gage (whose grandson became the botanist after whom a genus of the lily family *Gagea* was named). He cultivated the trees at Hengrave Hall in Suffolk without knowing what they were when they were planted. It is said that they came to be known as the ‘green Gage’s plum’.

There are several British varieties of the fruit and it is said by some that of these the best one is called ‘Coe’s Golden Drop’, one of those developed in about 1800 by Jervaise Coe (a near neighbour of Sir William Gage).