

Growing Great Apples

By Melinda Mann

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For best results, choose and plant carefully.

Thinking about planting apples? The Skagit Valley is a great place for them. Apple varieties for fresh eating, juice, pies, sauce, and cider all thrive here. Whether starting a home orchard or planting just a couple of trees, choosing the apples that are right for you will depend largely on how you want to use them, when you want them, and how much effort you want to put into growing them.

Many choices

During the past 40 years, the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation (WWFRF) has grown dozens of varieties, or cultivars, at the WSU Volunteer Display Gardens located on the property of WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, and offers recommendations for all of the various apple uses. Some WWFRF suggestions for the best fresh-eating (dessert”) apples include Honeycrisp, Holstein, Macoun, RubINETTE, and Espous Spitzenburg. For baking, sauce and cider, their top picks are Gravenstein (well known for applesauce), Elstar, Karmijn de Sonnaville, Jonagold and Belle de Boskoop.

Local WSU master gardeners who grow apples also enthusiastically recommend Melrose, Gravenstein, Liberty, Winter Banana, and Jonagold for fresh eating; Ashmead’s Kernal, Bramley’s Seedling, King, Gravenstein and Twenty Ounce for pies; and Transparent for applesauce.

If you are looking for apples to use far into the winter, good keepers include Early Fuji, Karmijn de Sonnaville, Melrose, Keepsake, and Braeburn. And, if you are most interested in doing the least amount of pruning, spraying and other maintenance, your easiest choices might be William’s Pride, Akane, Liberty, Spartan, Chehalis, Ashmead’s Kernal or Enterprise.

These are just some of the options available to the Skagit Valley apple grower, but it’s also important to remember that not all apples will grow well here. Popular names like Granny Smith, Goldrush, Mutsu, Yellow Newtown, and Cripps Pink (Pink Lady) require a long growing season and are too late for most of the Skagit Valley. And if you have a low tolerance for scab on your apples, you will want to avoid planting Gala, Golden Delicious, Red Delicious, or Ginger Gold, all of which are quite susceptible.

Choose your favorites

The best way to choose the apples you want to grow is to start with a taste test in the fall when apples are in season. In October the WWFRF will hold its annual harvest event at its WSU Volunteer Display Gardens in Mount Vernon, where you can taste apples that have a proven track record of growing well in this region. Likewise, tasting locally-grown apples at farmers’ markets, in the Skagit Valley Food Co-op or at local orchards can inform your decision. If you stick to supermarkets to determine your favorites, you will probably miss many great-tasting apples that are considered too unattractive for commercial growing.

After making a list of some apples you like, consider when each cultivar blooms. This is important not only in planning your harvest, but in making sure that your trees are pollinated and can bear fruit. Because an apple tree cannot pollinate itself, it must be planted near other apples that bloom at the same time: early, mid or late in the season. To complicate matters, some apples, including favorites like Gravenstein, Karmijn de Sonnaville, Bramley's Seedling, and Jonagold, produce sterile pollen—they will not pollinate any other trees—so they need two other varieties nearby for pollination.

Fortunately, in practice, if you live near other people with apple trees, there is a good chance that your apples will be pollinated by your neighbors' trees and vice versa. For example, if you notice a lot of early-season apple blossoms in your neighborhood, you will probably have no problem planting an early season tree. If your space is extremely limited and you don't know the availability of apple pollen, you can also plant a special tree with several varieties grafted on to one trunk. The different apple varieties create a self-pollinating tree, but also limit the number of each kind of apple you will have.

When you purchase apple saplings, you are purchasing an apple cultivar that is grafted onto rootstock. Rootstock determines the size and other growing factors of the tree. Trees grown on dwarf rootstock are the best choice for home orchards as they take less space and are easier to prune and harvest than larger trees.

Apples are usually purchased as bare root saplings and are best planted between November and mid-March when they are dormant, not fruiting or blooming. Most people plant bare root saplings when they become available in local nurseries—usually in the late winter/early spring. If you prefer to plant in the fall, you can purchase a container tree or have bare root saplings shipped to you in the fall from a nursery catalog.

When spacing apples, plant dwarf apple trees ten feet apart and position each tree to get a minimum of six hours of sun per day. If you are concerned about clay soil or poor drainage at the site where you want the tree, dig a pit several feet deep and fill it with water. If there is water standing in the hole after twenty hours, you should choose another site.

Planting procedures

Before planting bare root saplings, hydrate the roots by soaking them in a pail of water for an hour or so. Prune broken and tangled roots and roots longer than about eighteen inches. Plant your sapling in a hole that is about twice as wide as the root ball—four or five feet in diameter—with edges broken up and tapered so that the roots can expand into them easily. Put the sapling on a mound of soil in the center of the hole so that when you fill it back up with soil, the trunk is a little higher than it was in the nursery.



As far as Concrete's Jami Knudson is concerned, when it comes to apples, the bigger the better. Photo by Jason Miller.

Always use native soil to fill the hole and make sure that the tree's grafting union is visible two to four inches above the ground. This is essential so that the rootstock takes hold and the tree doesn't grow to full size! Trees usually require some minimal pruning at planting and dwarf apples need staking to keep them in place. After planting, paint the trunks with a white water-based indoor latex paint (this can be diluted to 50% with water) to prevent sunscald.

When your trees will bear fruit depends largely on their rootstock. Dwarfs often bear fruit in three years, while larger trees may take five years or longer. Some trees sold in containers are older and may bear fruit their first season in the ground.

For more information on choosing and growing apples or for upcoming events, visit the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation website at www.wwfrf.org. For more information in print, two very helpful handbooks, WSU's EB0937, *Fruit Handbook for Western Washington: Varieties and Culture* and EB1436, *Apple Cultivars for Puget Sound*, are available for purchase by calling the WSU Bulletin office at 1-800-723-1763.



As a deterrent to insects such as codling moth, these apples are wrapped in a material similar to women's hosiery, at the WSU Volunteer Display Gardens in Mount Vernon. Photo by Jason Miller.

Drip Irrigation workshop

- **What:** "Drip irrigation for the home gardener" — a free WSU Know & Grow workshop, will demystify the techniques and types of this low-volume watering strategy, which helps to reduce weeds and plant diseases. Learn about soaker hoses and emitter systems, how to design your own system, and what supplies to buy, plus a hands-on assembly demonstration. Presented by WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, in partnership with the WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center.
- **When:** 1:00 to 3:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 26
- **Where:** WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, 16650 Highway 536, west of Mount Vernon
- **Speaker:** Jeff Thompson, Snohomish County Master Gardener
- **Learn more:** To suggest an idea or topic for a future WSU Know & Grow workshop, call 360-428-4270.