

## Heirloom Apples

By Karen Palmer

*"Life does not seem regular and established when there is no apple-tree in the yard and about the buildings, no orchards blooming in the May and laden in the September, no baskets heaped with the crisp smooth fruits; without all these I am still a foreigner, sojourning in a strange land."* [L.H. Bailey, "The Apple-Tree", 1922]

Apples are more than a food source. For centuries, apples have been entwined in the myths and cultures of countries around the world. Colonial Americans depended on apples as a food source and a preservative. Cider was used to make cider vinegar for pickling and applejack (brandy made from apple juice) was used as a preservative for other fruits and often as an antiseptic or sedative. John Chapman (aka Johnny Appleseed) is a well-known figure who roamed around the country distributing apple seeds to settlers. Each apple tree was different – much of the fruit inedible and used for cider. However, some varieties that are sought after today, were born from the seeds distributed by Johnny Appleseed.



Everyone knows apples are good for them.

Even in the best grocery stores today, we only have a handful of choices. Considering that two of these choices are usually Red Delicious and Golden Delicious, both of which have been hybridized for storage and appearance resulting in a taste and texture that is horrid, we really have few choices. So what is an apple lover to do?

Plant your own apple trees. There are hundreds of varieties of heirloom apple trees available today. The key is to find several you really like. Most apples need a cross-pollinator so you should plan on at least two trees. Your local nursery will probably not have an heirloom variety (although occasionally I stumble across one in a typical nursery). At the end of this article, I include a list of mail-order nurseries that carry interesting varieties of apples. Some of these are individuals who maintain their nurseries as a labor of love and in devotion to heirloom apples.

But how do you know which apples you like? The only way to really know is to taste apples that are grown in your region. A McIntosh grown in the Northeast may be divine, but quite nondescript when grown in California. On the other hand, a Fuji grown in California far surpasses any grown elsewhere. So you cannot rely on the glowing descriptions in catalogs. You must taste them yourself.

If you have no idea which varieties you want in your yard, wait until next fall. Start looking for advertised apple tastings in early October. In the Portland, Oregon area, both the Home Orchard Society and the Portland Nursery

conduct large apple tastings each year. Once you have selected what you want, find a source and place an order for trees early. They will be shipped to you at the proper planting time.

Apple trees are best planted bare root as one or two-year whips, while they are dormant. In the Pacific Northwest, mid-March is a great time to plant but they can generally be planted as late as mid-April.

Apple trees do not reproduce true to seed. If you take five seeds from an apple you like and plant them, you will probably end up with five different kinds of apples, none of which even resemble the original apple. Furthermore, most if not all of the five will be what is commonly called a "spitter". You take one bite and spit it out. Since we rely less on cider today (the common use for "spitters") and prefer edible apples, we now graft our trees. An added benefit of this practice is that you can also control the size of the tree. A dwarfing rootstock, such as M9 or B9 is recommended for most home gardens. Trees on these rootstocks are easily maintained around six feet, making thinning, pruning, spraying, and picking much easier. An added benefit is that trees on dwarfing rootstocks will start to fruit within three to four years, rather than the seven years for a standard-size tree.

Consider disease-resistant factors when selecting your apple varieties. All apple trees will need some level of spraying, but a variety resistant to scab will require a lot less spraying. See Hortsense for information on scab control or [Crop Protection Guide for Tree Fruits in Washington](#) for spray schedules.

Although I am focusing on heirloom or antique apples, do not discount the new hybrids available today. Varieties such as Fuji, Honeycrisp, or Pink Lady have a devout following. Also many of the new hybrids have a higher level of disease resistance.

A word of warning before you head out for those apple tastings – make sure that one person in the family has some modicum of restraint. My husband and I started out with a plan for six to eight apple trees but after a few tastings we now have a total of 75, consisting of 52 different varieties. We have early, mid, and late eating apples, cooking apples, hard cider apples, crabapples for apple butter, pink-fleshed apples, etc. We plan vacations around orchard maintenance and harvest. We supply the entire neighborhood with fresh apples each year. We make gallons of hard cider. If you do not want your apples to rule your life, take heed!



Just picked!

Even though I said you should choose your apples only after tasting them, no apple article is complete without a few lists, just to get you started.

Western Cascade Fruit Society, Ten Best Apple Cultivars for Western Washington:

- Williams Pride
- Gravenstein
- Jonamac
- Chehalis

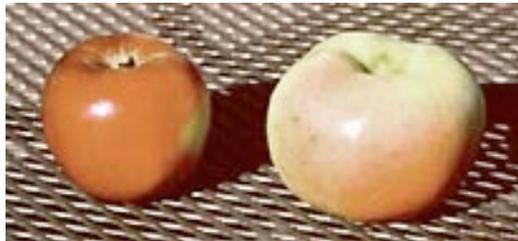
- Karmijn de Sonnaville
- Liberty
- Gala
- Elstar
- Spartan
- Jonagold

Scab Resistant Varieties:

- Akane
- Chehalis
- Liberty
- Tydeman Red
- Williams Pride
- Jonathan
- Elstar
- Jonagold
- Bramley's Seedling
- Ashmead's Kernel



King, Bramley Seedling,  
and Cox's Orange Pippin



King David and Winter Banana



Pink Pearl



Stayman Winesap and  
Wickson Crabs



Sierra Beauty and Braeburn



Belle de Boskoop, Cinnamon  
Spice and Calville Blanc d'Hiver

If I had to Pick Just Five:

- Jonathan – the first to ripen (perhaps that has something to do with it)
- Hidden Rose – pink flesh
- King David – great for eating, pies, applesauce
- Ashmead's Kernel – russet, great flavor, good keeper
- Sierra Beauty – the last to ripen, crisp and tart, keeps until March

In 1892 there were around 735 apple varieties that were available from commercial nurseries. Today there are fewer than 50. Luckily, some individuals have taken it upon themselves to maintain a large number of apple varieties, and offer trees for sale. Many wonderful varieties are believed to be extinct. We must not let the remaining varieties go the way of the Arkansas Beauty, the Chattahoochee, the Red Banana, or the Tuscaloosa (which won premium prize at the 1858 Montgomery, Alabama fair). These are but four of the hundreds of documented varieties that can no longer be found. Think of it as your civic duty to maintain a few of these old varieties. Do it for your heritage; do it for your grandchildren.

## Apple Tree Sources

[Trees of Antiquity](#) (previously Sonoma Antique Apple Nursery)

Paso Robles, CA

805-467-9909

About 150 varieties available. Very informative catalog.

[Miller Nurseries](#)

Canandaigua, New York

800-836-9630

About 60 varieties available.

[Stark Brothers](#)

Louisiana, Missouri

800-325-4180

[Raintree](#)

Morton, Washington

360-496-6400

Orchard Lane Growers

Gloucester, VA

804-694-0470

[orchard@crosslink.net](mailto:orchard@crosslink.net)

Over 200 varieties available.

### [Big Horse Creek Farm](#)

Lansing, NC

336-384-1134

Over 200 varieties available. Good descriptions in the catalog.

Nick Botner

Yoncalla, OR

641-849-2781

This one individual maintains hundreds of varieties by himself. Call for a current listing.

## Good Reading Books About Apples

Bailey, L.H. *The Apple-Tree*. New York: The MacMillan Co, 1922. [L.H. Bailey was a distinguished horticulturist. This book reads like a love letter to the apple. It is only available through the used book trade.]

Brown, Frank. *Apples*. New York: North Point Press, 1998.

Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire*. New York: Random House, 2001. [This book includes a chapter each on the apple, the tulip, marijuana, and the potato.]

Rosenstein, Mark. *In Praise of Apples*. North Carolina: Lark Books, 1996. [Includes recipes.]

Browning, Frank, and Silva, Sharon. *An Apple Harvest*. California: Ten Speed Press, 1999. [Includes recipes.]

## Apple References

Manhard, Warren. *Apples for the 21st Century*. Oregon: North American Tree Co., 1995. [Provides complete details on 50 readily available apple varieties. Also covers rootstocks and trellis techniques.]

Calhoun, Creighton Lee, Jr. *Old Southern Apples*. Virginia: McDonald & Woodward Publishing Co., 1995. [A classic reference book on thousands of varieties of apples, including those that are now extinct. Also includes beautiful photographs of apple paintings done by USDA artists from 1885 to 1930.]

Otto, Stella. *The Backyard Orchardist*. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 1993. [Contains complete information on caring for your apple trees, as well as other kinds of fruit trees.]

Phillips, Michael. *The Apple Grower*. Utah, Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 1998. [Contains information on siting, planting, pruning, disease & pest control, and harvesting for the organic orchardist.]

[Apple Journal](#). This website is full of information on varieties, orchards nationwide, and recipes.