



Apples of Antiquity

Whether they're called heirloom, heritage or historical, these time-honored apples of yesteryear are staging a dramatic comeback in orchards all over the world, and rightfully so.

By Sue Weaver

About the Author

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Is the supermarket Red Delicious really an apple? After sinking your teeth into a ripe, juicy Gravenstein, you'll think not. Are grocery store Granny Smiths worth wrapping in pie crust?

©Sharon Fibelkorn "No," claim an ever-increasing throng of apple connoisseurs who choose Summer Rambos, Red Astrachens and Pound Sweet apples instead.

Are you tired of the same old hard, waxed, factory-grown apples? Then lose those tasteless commercial counterfeits and switch to the best. But to do that, you'll have to grow your own, or buy them from a grower of antique apples.

Antiques? Yes indeed. While apple horticulturists and enthusiasts (called pomologists) disagree on an exact time frame, all apples introduced prior to the beginning of the 20th century are considered antiques.

Also called heirloom, heritage and historical apples, those time-honored apples of yesteryear are staging a dramatic comeback. In 1900, between 7,000 and 8,000 named apple cultivars flourished in far-flung American orchards and backyards. Today several hundred survive. Only a dozen or so are grown commercially—and that's a shame.

Antique Apple Books

Old Southern Apples, by Creighton Lee Calhoun, Jr. (The McDonald & Woodward Publishing Company; 1995)

The Book of Apples, by Joan Morgan and Alison Richards (Elbury Press, London; 1993)

Apples: Collecting Old Southern Varieties, by Joyce L. Neighbors

(Self-published 1998; Joyce Neighbors, 1039 Lay Springs Rd., Gadsden, AL 35904)

The Apples of Maine, by George A. Stilphen (Self-published 2000; George A. Stilphen, (207) 743-9420, maineapl@gwi.net)

Apples, by Roger Yepsen

(W. W. Norton and Co; 1994)

Apples for the 21st Century, by Warren Manhardt (available through www.treesofantiquity.com/) With the development of reliable refrigerated boxcars in the 1940s, orchardists began selecting for fruit fit to travel. Rather than flavor, high and dependable production, bruise resistance, shelf life and cosmetic perfection became growers' keywords.

Tough older varieties like the Red and the Yellow Delicious, Granny Smith, Jonathan and McIntosh were "improved" and new crossbreds developed. As grocery store apples became the norm and existing trees died, thousands of old cultivars became extinct.

Apple Evolution

Some apples, like the Lady, a red and yellow nugget of sweet juicy flavor, have been propagated since Roman times.

Apples have a unique characteristic in that they never grow true from seed, so in order to propagate a new Lady apple tree, a bit of the old is required: A piece of budded "scionwood" must be hand-grafted onto sturdy rootstock and urged to grow.

Thousands of hands have lovingly created countless new Lady trees since Pliny the Elder praised the toothsome fruit in the first century A.D.

In 1628 French pomologist Jean de la Quintinye wrote of the succulent wee treasure, "it may be eaten greedily at a chop with its coat all on." Ladies of the royal court stowed the snack-size apples in the pockets of their gowns because, says de la Quintinye, "they yield no unpleasant scent."

Throughout the centuries, the Lady, also called Api or Christmas Apple, adorned countless Della Robia wreaths and fruit



garlands, graced innumerable holiday groaning boards and found their way into an untold number of Christmas stockings. Yet nowhere is it commercially grown today. The apple is ... tiny! Supermarket buyers want big. And while the tree is a heavy producer, it's slow to bear, sometimes taking a full decade to fruit.

Did You Know? Apples likely originated in the Dzungarian Alps, a tall mountain range separating Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China, in an area still hailed as "the original wild apple forest."

Archaeologists have unearthed charred apple remains in Swiss Stone Age lake dwellings and at a dig near Jericho in Jordan dating to 6500 B.C.E. They also discovered dried apple rings in the tomb of Queen Pu-Abi (2500 B.C.E.) in Southern Iran.

Roman statesman and historian, Pliny the Elder (circa 23 C.E.) described 29 apple cultivars in his writings. He also speaks of people in "Farther India" who "eat naught and live by the smell of apples."

The saying, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away" (coined in 1904 by J.T. Stinson in an address to the Great St. Louis Exposition) is a modern take on the old saw, "To eat an apple going to bed, will make the doctor beg his bread." These are a result of sour apples being stewed and eaten at bedtime to alleviate insomnia and constipation. Also, a rotten-apple poultice was applied to sore eyes and hand lotions were concocted of apple pulp, lard and rosewater.

Young girls, particularly in Scotland, Ireland and our Southern mountains, once peeled an apple in a single strip, then flung it over their left shoulder believing it would land spelling the initial of their future husbands' name. In Rochester, N.Y., on October 16, 1976, 16-year-old Kathy Wafler Madison created a single apple peel of 172' 4" long. Whether she threw it over her shoulder is not recorded. She did, however, grow up to become sales manager for an apple tree nursery. And this is true of most antique apples. Few ship well. The same qualities that make them poor shippers—delicate flesh or thin skins—make mechanical harvesting impossible. Some yield a great deal less than modern commercial apples, others are biennial bearers, meaning they produce large crops of fruit only every other year. Since the average supermarket apple buyer prefers red apples, many antiques are poorly colored by modern standards—or strangely shaped, or in some cases, just plain dowdy.

For example, the Knobbed Russet (also called Knobby Russet, Winter Russet and Old Maid's Winter Apple) is a juicy, aromatic, crisp early 19th century British apple once grown throughout our American South. But, it is ugly! Like all russet apples, its skin is overlaid with leathery "russeting."

But while most russet cultivars have a splotch of fawn-colored russet here, a splash of coppery webbing there, the green and yellow Knobbed Russet is all but entirely enrobed in thick gray and black russet, its surface knotted with welts and knobs. It resembles a misshapen potato, but bite into it and mm-mmm, the sugary-spicy, succulent flesh cracks as you chomp—and wipe fast lest the juice dribble down your chin. And like most russet apples, the Knobbed Russet makes ambrosial cider too.

The Tradition of Apples

In 2003 cider is a tasty drink to savor at holidays like Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, but to our ancestors it was a great deal more. So, indeed, were apples. Apples were a staple of the Colonial American diet. Because they could be stored longer than any other fresh food, as much as six months under optimal conditions, they sometimes spelled the difference between survival—or not.

Poor immigrants packed apple seeds along from the old country and they planted large orchards on the new frontier. The fruit from the best trees was eaten from hand, fried in lard for breakfast, fashioned into pies, applesauce and vinegar, baked, and pressed for cider or fermented into brandy. Since few from-seed trees produce quality fruit, the rest fed the family's chickens, pigs, milk cow and draft animals.

Wealthier colonists sometimes imported trees. It's said that George Washington de-stressed by pruning the trees in his Mount Vernon orchard. His preferred apple, Newtown Pippin, which was introduced to him by Thomas Jefferson, is still a favorite with antique apple connoisseurs. Jefferson grew the Newtown Pippin at Monticello alongside his first-choice apple, Esopus Spitzenburg. One of the first things Jefferson did upon returning from serving as Minister to France was to plant more Spitzenburgs in his sprawling orchard.

Fruit trees remained an integral part of every farmstead and most village yards well into the early 20th century. Until the birth of rolling refrigeration, apart from root-cellar apples and pears, fresh fruit was expensive and rarely available out of season.

Apple Lore

Specialized cultivars were grown for every need: fresh eating, baking, cooking, drying, canning, cider and brandy making and storage.



Finding Out About Antique Apples Tree-Mendus Fruit Farm
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(877) 863-3276

Nursery Stock: Calhoun's Nursery

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Henry Leuthardt Nurseries, Inc.

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Miller Nurseries

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Tomlinson's #1 Farm

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Antique apples for the Upper Midwest.

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Online Resources:

USDA Plant Hardiness Map

"'A' is For Antique Apples" by Patricia B. and David L. Mitchell

Hundreds of varieties cataloged; not to be missed!

"Apples of Your Eye" by Tim Hensley

Smithsonian magazine, November 2002

Apple Journal - "A Passion For Apples"

Everything related to apples—don't miss it!

Apples: Information, History and Recipes

Links to apple recipe sites and pages And equally unique to their flavors were their names. Some belie an apple's unique flavor, such as Pitmaston Pineapple, Sops of Wine and Chenango Strawberry; or a whimsical shape, like those of Cathead, Sheepnose and Cowsnout. Molly Whopper, Twenty Ounce and Pound Sweet were obviously big ones. Colors found their way into names like Rusty Coat, Greenskin and Yellow Horse. Names foretold the harvest: Winter Jon, August and Early Redbird.

Some like Little Bennie, Aunt Sally and Ben Davis were named after people. Others like Ohio Beauty, Vermont Sweet and Arkansas Black are characterized by where they've been.

A few hint at less-than-stellar attributes: Knobbed Russet and Greasy Pippin. Others, the sublime: Blessing, Nonesuch and Fail-Me-Never. Many cultivars were known by scores of regional names; the Newtown Pippin by more than 100.

Regardless of its name, each flavorful old cultivar is steeped in lore. Time spent researching favorite apples in catalogs and reference books is sheer historical delight. Consider this notable half dozen: Calville Blanc (aka Calville Blanc D'Hiver and White Winter Calville). First mentioned in 1598 as Blanche de Zurich, it was renamed for the village of Calville in Normandy. It is an aromatic, medium-large winter apple, its pale greenish or yellow skin splashed with pale red blush. Still considered the gourmet culinary apple of France, it boasts more vitamin C per fruit than an orange. Cooked, its tender yellow-white flesh holds its shape, making it a peerless baking apple, but Calville Blancs are also delicious eaten fresh or



as applesauce.

In 1628, LeLectier, procurer to King Louis XIII added Calville Blanc to the royal gardens at Orleans. French Impressionists immortalized Calville Blanc, among them Claude Monet in his 1879 still life "Apples and Grapes." Cox's Orange Pippin. It emerged in 1825 in the orchard of Richard Cox, a retired English brewer, from a seed of Ribson Pippin. Ribson Pippin, considered Britain's leading dessert apple prior to Cox, sprouted from seed brought to England from France in 1688. Cox's Orange Pippin began winning prizes in the 1800s and was granted a First Class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society as recently as 1962. In his 1937 classic work "The Apples of England," W. V. Taylor called Cox's Orange Pippin "the greatest apple of this age." This is a wonderfully aromatic red and yellow fall apple, tender, juicy and luscious. Its creamy-colored flesh is crisp, fine-grained and hinting of honey, nuts and pears. Though famed for out-of-hand munching, Cox's Orange Pippin is a superlative applesauce and cider apple, an average baker and it stores well, its flavor improving with age.

Duchess of Oldenburg (aka Duchess, Oldenburg, Borovinka, Charlamowsky). This is an extra-hardy, large, tart, juicy and mostly red-over-pale greenish-yellow apple originating in the upper Volga region of Russia some time around 1700.

Introduced to England in 1817, it became a popular Victorian cultivar. It, along with Russian expatriates Alexander, Tetofsky and Red Astrachen, reached America in 1835. Duchess of Oldenburg remains a popular cooking apple in the former USSR and North Europe, where its hardiness and disease resistance is treasured. With Yellow Transparent, Red Astrachen or Dolgo Crabapple to provide pollen, and it for them, Duchess of Oldenburg can be grown as far north as U.S. zone 3.

Grimes Golden (aka Grimes Golden Pippin, Bellflower) is a medium-large crisp and juicy, spicy-sweet lump of gold first discovered growing wild shortly before the turn of the 19th century. The October 1947 issue of Life magazine claims the scrumptious, yellow-fleshed Grimes Golden is "believed to have sprouted from one of the seeds planted by Johnny Appleseed about 1795 in Wellsburg, West Virginia" on the farm of one Thomas Grimes. A granite monument marks the spot. Nosh a Grimes Golden fresh from the tree, fry it, bake it whole or in pies; press cider, too. According to Creighton L. (Lee) Calhoun, southern apple expert extraordinaire, its fragrant flesh registers 18.81 percent sugar and Grimes Golden ferments to 9 percent alcohol, making it a superb hard cider- and brandy-making apple.

Newtown Pippin (aka Green Newtown Pippin, Yellow Newtown Pippin), originated in Newtown, Long Island, in 1759. Its seed is thought to have been carried to New York from England around 1666. Another flavorful all-round apple, its firm, crisp and aromatic yellow flesh packs a toothsome, out-of-hand wallop for tart apple fanciers and excels in culinary and cider-making qualities, remaining fresh and delightfully firm and flavorful in storage through April and later.

While George Washington munched this favorite fruit, Benjamin Franklin shipped barrels of carefully cached Newtown Pippins to Europe to help establish American trade abroad. Later, when Andrew Stephenson, the United States Foreign Minister to the Court of St. James, presented the new Queen Victoria with several casks of Newtown Pippins, she pronounced it the royal favorite and exempted American-grown Newtown Pippins from British import taxes. Summer Rambo (aka Lorraine, Summer Rambour and Rambour Franc) hails from the French village of Rambure where it was formally recognized in 1535. Jean de la Quintinye, manager of Louis XIV's royal gardens, favored the Summer Rambo. By 1767 Colonial Americans grew this large, luscious, moderately tart, multi-purpose apple for frying, drying, baking, pies and applesauce. Ripe Summer Rambos are greenish-yellow flushed with red, sometimes accented with scattered russet patches. Their yellowish flesh is juicy, crisp and tangy with subdued sweet overtones.

Growing Apples

Think you'd like to grow these tasty treasures? Get started choosing cultivars by perusing antique-apple catalogs and the apple resources we've suggested (above), or enter "antique," "heirloom," "heritage," or simply "old," along with "apple" in your favorite search engine, and you'll be surprised what you find. However, before making selections, you'll need to determine your hardiness zone; most seed and fruit-tree catalogs include a map, or consult the USDA version at www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone. Apples flourish in zones 3 through 10 but the farther north or south you live, the more limited your selection.

Most apples are self-sterile—they require the pollen of another cultivar to set fruit. Your best ploy: plant four or more trees to be certain. Barring that, choose at least two trees that flower at the same time. A few cultivars are totally sterile, pollinating neither themselves nor other trees. In if doubt, cross-reference your choices with this heirloom trees chart.

Choose the size tree to best suit your needs. Dwarf trees mature around eight to 10 feet tall and produce roughly 50 to 60 pounds of fruit annually. Dwarf trees initially cost more, require lifelong staking and are usually brittle; not as hardy as bigger trees and they're a poor choice for northern orchards. Semi-dwarf trees are most antique apple growers' first choice. At 12- to 15-foot tall, nearly all pruning and harvesting can be done from the ground and they bear up to 200 pounds of fruit seasonally, yet they're far sturdier than their dwarf kin. Full-size trees mature at various heights from the naturally dwarfed Lady to semi-dwarf size Wealthy and Yellow Transparent, to big, spreading apple trees like Summer Rambo. Within a cultivar, dwarfed, semi-dwarfed or full size, the smaller it is, the younger it will set fruit.



In warm climates, chill factor enters the equation. Apples generally require 200 to 1,700 hours of 32- to 45-degree F temperatures (chill hours) logged between early November and mid-February to break winter dormancy. Warm-climate apple growers should choose those requiring 400 hours or less.

Organic orchardists need trees with natural disease resistance. Some require little or no spraying but with other antiques, expect to share fruit with worms. Some trees bear fruit soon after planting, among them Missouri Pippin, Horse, Duchess of Oldenburg, Chenango Strawberry, Smokehouse, Winter Banana, Maiden Blush, McIntosh and Summer Rambo.

Is hardiness important? Wealthy, Red Astrachen and Yellow Transparent flourish in chilly zone 3; Jefferis, Ashmead's Kernel, Campfield, Court Pendu Plat, Snow Apple, Tolman Sweet and Alexander thrive in zone 4.

Need lots of apples? Plant Shockley, Belle De Boskoop, Bramley's Seedling, American Beauty, Huntsman, Late Strawberry, Priestly or Summer Queen. If you want big apples, try Bietigheimer, a 16th century German cooking apple or the Monstrous Pippin, an 18th century giant also called American Mammoth.

Apples that store well are Arkansas Black, Lady Sweet, Chesney, Swaar, Allum or Yellow Bellflower.

Seeking something different? Grow apples with interesting flavors, such as the pear-like Jefferis or Winter Sweet Paradise, or hint-of-pineapple cultivars like Pitmaston Pineapple, Lamb Alley Pearmain and Ananas Reinette.

And so it goes ... The cultivars named here are merely the tip of the antique-apple iceberg. The old ones are out there, ready and waiting to take root in your hobby farm yard or orchard. So fling those insipid supermarket apples out the window. Grow your own fruit—the scrumptious, juice-dripping, lip-smacking, aromatic, crisp and crunchy apples of yore. Your great-grandparents loved them. You will too.

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