



Apple Tree, NH Big Tree for May

By Anne Krantz, NH Big Tree Team,
UNH Cooperative Extension

The explosion of apple blossoms in May transforms the most gnarled old tree into a delicate cloud of beauty, prompting the NH Tree Steward Big Tree Team to select it as the May “Tree of the Month.”

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) in his essay “The Wild Apple Tree,” described the blossoms perfectly: ‘The flowers of the apple are perhaps the most beautiful of any tree, so copious and so delicious to both sight and scent.’

Although not a native fruit tree, the very earliest settlers, fond of apple cider, brought the seeds to New England. Apple trees thrived in New England and so did cider making, providing a popular beverage in colonial times.

Its short trunk and rounded form make apple trees easy to identify in farm settings, but when growing in the wild or along roadsides they can disappear into the thickets. Discovery of the former national champion apple tree in Bedford in the 1990’s happened when an apple fell on a person’s head. Looking up into the tangled tree canopy, a huge hidden apple tree was discovered. It had an enormous trunk – 187 inches around! It survived as the national champion for many years before the wind blew it down in March, 2005.

The present New Hampshire state champion big apple tree in Kingston is over 40 feet tall with a trunk 144 inches around – about four feet in diameter! Obviously, it is very old.

Apples trees planted on early American farms provided fruit and beverage for the family. Apples were accepted “as is” with no worry about diseases or pests, blemishes or worms. They were fine for cider making. In the 1790s, Thomas Andrew Knight of England began the first controlled apple hybridization program to improve apples. He developed a number of improved cultivars of many fruit trees.

About the same time in America, superior apple varieties discovered in the wild became noted for their unusually fine fruit. John McIntosh found the Baldwin in 1793 near Lowell, MA, and the McIntosh in Ontario, Canada in 1796. His son Allan appreciated the fine fruit and in 1836 started propagating by grafting and budding, creating the source for all McIntosh apple trees. With both improved varieties and improved transportation (trains), commercial apple farms were established all over New England to grow fruit for the expanding city markets.

The national census of 1900 included a census of apple trees. New Hampshire had 2,034,000 apple trees producing 1,979,000 bushels of apples. Production declined by 1910, and 1,241,000 trees produced 1,108,000 bushels, while New York and Pennsylvania gained orchards and production. Orchards, with dwarf apple trees grown in tight rows like grapes, are replacing the huge apple orchards of the past. The giant old wild apple trees are becoming rare, as farmlands in New Hampshire disappear.

It would be exciting to find another national champion apple tree in New Hampshire. If you notice a huge cloud of apple blossoms poking out of a hedgerow, along the roadside or in an ancient orchard, check it out. If it is about the size of the current state champion, go to the Big Tree web site to learn how to nominate it for measuring. The NH Big Tree program cooperates with the National Register of Big Trees through American Forests. For more information about the NH Big Tree program and to see the list go to <http://extension.unh.edu/Forestry/FORCTS.htm>