

Identifying Wild Apples

by Steve Turaj

Warm, bright sunny Spring days when the apples were in full bloom. Honeybees and numerous native pollinators were busy. The results are before us now, an abundance of apple laden trees seen about the county. Pale yellows to shiny purple-reds and all colors in-between; these apples come in many shapes and sizes. Understandably, a few choice specimens show up at County Extension field offices this time of year. The inevitable question "Which kind is it?"

I suppose it would be easiest to just stick with a few of the usual suspects. Here is a selection of some old-time/heirloom varieties which may match what you've picked:

Duchess (of Oldenburgh) A late Summer apple. Medium large, roundish and flattened a little at the ends. Light red in stripes and splashes on a yellow skin. Tart, juicy, yellow-white flesh. Believed to have originated near Russia's Volga River, so pretty hardy

Wolf River Quite large! Smooth yellow-white skin splashed with bright red, very russet. Coarse yellow-white flesh that's often soft and mealy by time you get around to picking it. Not a storage apple but said to dry rather well. Well thought of for it's resistance to apple scab. Many large apples acquire this name.

Yellow Transparent A medium size, roundish apple with..yes, nearly transparent yellow skin, sometimes with a red blush. Has a crisp, sub-acid flesh, its very early ripening qualities make it popular for those first fresh apple-pies and sauces.

Chenango Strawberry A rather different shape, large, oblong, conical, angular. Shiny striped crimson skin on a yellow ground. White tender flesh of pleasant flavor. A very pretty apple, unfortunately poor shipping qualities and a tendency to ripen over a long time period makes it rare in today's orchards.

Blue Pearmain There are many Pearmain types which are late-season or Winter apples. This one is very large, round to oblong shaped and noticeably "heavy-in-the-hand". A dark purple-red skin in broken stripes on a lighter background, conspicuous blue bloom, and 'frosted window pane' russeting makes it stand out in an orchard. A long-time cider ingredient favorite. A little imagination renders a pear flavor.

Hyslop Crab Large(for a crab apple) and round. Grows in fruit clusters. Bright crimson red skin, also with a bluish-bloom, a strikingly attractive apple best harvested early for best quality. Known for its hardiness.

That's a start, but it hardly makes a dent in my reference: **The American Fruit Culturist by JJ Thomas.** from which I've pulled most of these descriptions. It's The up-to-date edition of 1897, listing nearly a thousand different apple varieties from Abbotts Sweet to Zuckoffs Winter. Identifying characteristics, besides the obvious ones include stem length, basin and calyx(flower-end) appearance, seed cavity form, and flavor...a hard to define trait. A notation is also made regarding potential "Changes wrought by climate and soil"

If identifying wild apples was only that easy. Long before we began cloning sheep we've been doing so with apples, but with far greater success. "Apple Cultivars do not grow true from seed, they are propagated asexually by means of grafting or budding" so says our **NE Extension Apple Production Guide**. Scions of a desired cultivar are grafted in spring onto rootstocks selected for specific purposes, ie dwarfing growth habit, cold tolerance, and such. The swollen area at the base of the tree is the graft union site.

All this means is that the McIntosh you have growing in your backyard is essentially the same one developed by John McIntosh of Dundas County, Ontario in 1870. He did so by cross-pollinating two different varieties popular in those times. However, once the bees go to work carrying your Mac's pollen to another tree down the road, there's no telling what you'll have if you plant its seed. Perhaps the next Honeycrisp, or more likely, one that fails the "bite and spit test". We've been growing apples for many years in New Hampshire and the bees have been busy. Lots of genetic material has been mixed up and recombined over that time, think of the possibilities! Identifying wild apples? ...Probably impossible.

Here are a few additional references for the undaunted;

Apples Of New York by SA Beach, 1905 This two volume set is one most botanist dream of finding at a used book sale. Just the best.

Apples by R Ypsen 1994 One you are more likely to find, a small nicely illustrated guide with dozens of popular and less-known varieties. Includes a great list of go to sources about apples

Yearbooks Of Agriculture What you just may run across for a dollar or two at a library book sale, many of the late 1800s feature colorful plates of "new" cultivars

www.nafex.org **North American Fruit Explorers** - an amateur group, with many pros focused on the discovery and cultivation of nuts and fruits. Lots of net-working possibilities..