

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

By Carol Ponchet-Cassidy

We are hopeful when we plant an apple tree. For each tree that goes into the ground, so is planted the dreams of homegrown bounty and the simple pleasures of Mother Nature's ever changing seasons.

Getting philosophical about planting an apple tree may sound a little sentimental, but the feeling is not rare among gardeners.

The day has arrived when you decide to drive out to the alluring world of your favorite garden-center and purchase a new apple tree. Before you begin, there are some decisions to be made that will ensure a healthy, productive tree that will serve your needs: Which variety do you want? How big can your tree get? And finally, what are its pollination requirements?

The first order of business is to decide what variety of apple you want. Perhaps you have longed to have a Gravenstein, such as the one from your childhood memories. This is a large, early harvest variety that is meant to be eaten fresh from the tree. It has lots of crunch and a tart-sweet taste. Maybe a Golden Delicious is more to your tastes because of its aromatic flavor and superior qualities as a pie and sauce apple. If you need a more all purpose apple, Spartan fits the bill as a medium sized fruit with lots of crunch, a mild sweet taste and reasonable storing qualities.

Let us not forget some of the heritage varieties such as Cox's Orange Pippin with loads of taste and a firm flesh that stands up to baking, or a Belle de Boskoop or Bramley's Seedling which are both excellent keepers with loads of flavor for all your culinary needs.

One of my personal favorites is Winter Banana. This apple is beautiful, with its banana-yellow skin and bright rosy "cheek". Winter Banana can hang on the tree until November. It makes a lovely feature in the fall garden. It has good perfume and is best eaten fresh out of hand.

Take the time to investigate apple varieties, have taste tests and let your memories wander back to your days of youth when you sat under an old apple tree and ate "the best apple in the world"!

Consider how you want to use the fruit. Will it be strictly for eating out of hand or do you want a variety that will keep well in storage? Do you want an apple for cooking or juicing? It's worthwhile, and often lots of fun, to go out to the farmer's markets and sample the different varieties. Many of the growers are quite knowledgeable and may make recommendations.

Once you've decided on which variety you want, the next decision regards the mature size of the tree. How big can your apple tree get? Are you willing to climb a ladder to pick the fruit? Most folks like a free-standing tree in their backyard to be no more than 10 to 12 feet high. As a "small" tree, it will be practical to pick from, and can easily be worked into a landscape design.

Not for duplication. Property of the author.

Provided by: *Le Coteau Farms Nursery & Garden Centre*
304 Walton Place, Victoria, B.C. (t)250-658-5888 (f)250-658-0545
farms@lecoteau.com ~ www.lecoteau.com

The rootstock that your apple tree is grafted onto will determine the mature size. Most growers in the south-west region of British Columbia use a fairly consistent group of rootstocks for grafting. In the nursery trade, they are referred to as “very dwarf”, “dwarf” and “semi-dwarf”. They are all given a “dwarf” designation to separate them from the “standard” fruit trees that can grow up to 30 feet.

Some of the dwarf rootstocks used were developed at the Merton-Malling Research Station in Kent, England and all begin with the letter M. M9 is a “very dwarf” root stock that will generally produce a mature sized tree of 8 to 10 feet. M26 is a “dwarf” rootstock. It is what I call “mid-size”. It will grow to approximately 10 to 12 feet. M106 and M111 are called “semi-dwarf” and will grow 12 to 15 feet.

You may encounter other root stock options in your travels such as a very dwarf cold hardy root stock called P22, and Ottawa 3, a hardy mid-size root stock.

Soil is another factor to consider when determining which apple-root stock pairing will work best for you. If you want to plant an apple tree in loose, gravelly, porous soil, (such as what is commonly found in the Gulf Islands) then a larger root stock such as M106 or M111 is preferable. As well as having greater size above ground, these two rootstocks have more vigorous root systems below. The roots will grow deeper, and be able to access water deep in the soil and, thus sustain the needs of the tree.

If you have a layer of clay (often called hard pan) a foot or two below the soil surface, M9 is the best choice as it has more shallow roots. The shallow rooting of M9 however, will require that it be permanently staked. If you have good quality soil, your options for apple-root stock pairings are wide open.

As you determine the variety of apple and the best root stock for your planting site, you must also bear in mind the pollination requirements of your apple variety. Pollination is a necessary event for fruit production to occur. A lone apple tree, in full bloom, is generally unable to pollinate itself. It needs the genetically different pollen of another apple variety to set fruit. Reputable garden centers will have pollination charts available to determine compatibility.

The reason for all this attention to pollination is because the “window of opportunity” for apple blossoms to be pollinated is very short. Generally a flower is receptive for roughly 24 hours.

Apple varieties are broken down into three bloom-time groups: early bloomers, mid-season bloomers and late bloomers. If you choose a Cox’s Orange Pippin for example, and an Elstar, they are both mid-season bloomers and will pollinate each other. Golden Delicious which is a late bloomer could be partnered up with a Winter Banana, and an Akane which is an early bloomer could be paired with Yellow Transparent.

It is always helpful to find out what existing varieties of apples are growing near your planting site. If your neighbor has a Spartan, then it will pollinate any mid-season blooming variety of apple you choose. As well, if there is a crabapple tree close by, it blooms for a long time and will pollinate virtually any apple variety. The only stipulation is that the other tree must be within 100 feet and in visual range. The bees will fly the distance to pollinate if they can see the blossoms.

If you only have room for one tree and there are no neighboring trees to pollinate for you, a multi-graft apple tree is an option. These trees have two or three different varieties grafted at about three feet up on the rootstock. They tend to be small trees, without the large crop that a single grafted variety will yield. If you desire just enough fruit for one or two people, a multi-graft may be just the ticket!

A final comment on pollination. There are some varieties of apple that have absolutely no ability to pollinate. These are called triploids. Some examples of triploids are Gravenstein, Mutsu, Jonagold, Bramley's Seedling and Belle de Boskoop. If you wish to plant a triploid variety, then you will need the pollen from two other varieties to produce fruit. For example, if you choose a Jonagold and a Royal Gala (both mid-season bloomers) the Royal Gala (which is not a triploid) will pollinate the Jonagold, but the Jonagold will not pollinate the Royal Gala. You will need another mid-season bloomer to do that job.

As you can see, there are many factors to consider before you purchase a new apple tree. Which variety will you select? How large or small do you want your tree to grow, and finally, when does your apple variety bloom and what are its pollination requirements?

There is indeed much thought that goes into choosing an apple variety. All of this "homework" will pay off when you're picking your delicious apples and reaping Mother Nature's bounty for decades to come.