

## Getting to the core of growing apples



Unless you count the Garden of Eden, the ubiquitous apple is native to Central Asia, where its ancient ancestors grew wild, small, and sour. Over the years, everyone from Alexander the Great to George Washington had a hand in improving the quality of the fruit and the vigor of the tree. The Romans made particularly significant strides in turning these iffy fruits into the larger, sweeter treats that we call *Malus domestica* today. Eventually, French and British colonists carried the seeds to America where -- you guessed it -- Johnny Appleseed helped spread the seed.

Thanks to Johnny and the rest of us who were smitten once we bit into this all-American fruit, there are literally thousands of apple varieties today. For that reason, care must be taken to select an apple tree that is right for your space and your palate. Sure, there are always apple trees at the nursery. But how do you know if it's the right one for your taste buds and your microclimate? Here's a primer on how to select and care for an apple tree.

**Selecting and planting** -- The best time to plant an apple tree is during its winter dormancy. They prefer well-drained sites, full sun, and infrequent deep watering in summer. Apple trees do not perform well on their own roots. Instead, they are grafted onto sturdy, disease-resistant rootstocks with really exciting names like M111 and M9. But make no mistake: the rootstock is extremely important because it helps prevent disease and determines the size of the mature tree. Dwarf apple trees grow to around 8 to 10 feet tall, semi-dwarf to 12-15 feet, and a full size (standard) apple tree will grow to 25 feet. If you can't picture yourself pruning, spraying, and harvesting 25 feet off the ground, then you may want to consider a dwarf or semi-dwarf.

Most areas of Marin receive adequate chill for apples. However, most red varieties prefer the cooler climate of, say, Mill Valley, to the heat of inland Marin. Good choices for marine influenced microclimates (think fog and dew much of the year) include Yellow Delicious, Fuji, Gala, Granny Smith, Mitsu, and Anna. Gardeners in cold winter/warm summer microclimates can add Gravenstein and Red Delicious to the list.

Apples require cross-pollination from another apple, so you may want to plant two trees instead of one (unless you are sure your neighbor has an apple tree that blooms at the same time). Alternatively, you can opt for a multi-graft apple tree that produces two, three, or even four different varieties all on one tree.

**Care** -- Yes, you might find a worm in your apple. In fact, apples are prone to a variety of misfortunes, including cosmetic russetting from too much fog, codling moth, apple maggots, mildew, fireblight, and apple scab. But that juicy fruit is definitely worth it. Here is a quick rundown of apple tree chores, courtesy of our friends at ANR:

**Winter** - Spray trees with horticultural oil to control scale, aphid eggs, and mite eggs, prune to allow in plenty of light

**Spring** - Apply fungicide to control apple scab and powdery mildew, thin apples to approximately 1 apple per 6 inches of branch, fertilize (a bag of steer manure works nicely)

**Summer** - Fertilize monthly (20 pounds of manure/tree), spray for codling moth worms,

watch for aphids and mites, irrigate

**Fall** - Continue watering, fertilize after harvest, pick up leaves and destroy to prevent spread of apple scab, apply mulch

***By Marie Narlock***