

Autumn Is Apple Time

By Susan Camp

We use apples every day, especially in the autumn: in pies, cakes, crisps, and crumbles; to make jelly and apple butter; for juice, applesauce, soft and hard cider, and vinegar. Mulled cider is a delightful cold weather drink, with its enticing, spicy aroma. Anyone who was young during the 1960's and 1970's will remember that famous apple wine. A crisp, juicy apple is a great snack. I don't know if "an apple a day keeps the doctor away", but apples are low in calories and high in fiber.

Virginia ranks sixth in commercial apple production in the United States, after Washington, New York, Michigan, California, and Pennsylvania. Seventy percent of Virginia apples are processed as applesauce, apple butter, apple juice, and cider. Most Virginia apples are grown in the rich soil from the northern Shenandoah Valley to the Roanoke Valley. Other commercial apple growing counties include Albemarle, Rappahannock, and Patrick in the Piedmont region, and Carroll County in southwest Virginia. Apple production contributes approximately \$235 million dollars each year to Virginia's economy.

A growing industry in Virginia is cider production, particularly in the Piedmont. New cideries open every year, and a few have gained national recognition. Hard cider is a fashionable alcoholic drink right now, and steadily gaining in popularity. Cider can be produced from commercial apples, including Stayman or Winesap, both grown in Virginia, but some cider producers are touting little known varieties like Sheepnose, Hewes Crab, and Black Twig for superior cider color and flavor.

Have you ever wondered why apples from the supermarket don't taste the way you remember they did when you were a child? There are over 7500 named cultivars of apple, but only a handful are grown commercially, including Red and Golden Delicious, Granny Smith for cooking, Gala, Pink Lady, Fuji, Rome, and Honeycrisp. These cultivars, and a few others, are bred for disease and insect resistance, color, shape, texture, and shipping and storing longevity. Please note that I didn't mention taste. Commercial apples are bred for sweetness and low acidity, rather than unique flavor.

So where are the other 7400 varieties being grown? Most of them aren't, but there has been a resurgence of interest in recent years in heirloom or vintage varieties. Farmers' markets in rural areas, roadside fruit stands, and county and state fairs are potential sources of renewed cultivars. Many of the vintage apples are grown organically. They may not be the picture-perfect, red, yellow, or pink apples seen in trendy cooking and decorating magazines. Heirloom varieties often are oddly misshapen with russet spots and bumpy skin. With vintage apples, it is all about the flavor and the nostalgia for times gone by. The famous Albemarle Pippin and the Arkansas Black are recommended for growing in Tidewater.

If you decide to grow an apple tree, you can't just throw a seed into a hole in the ground and hope it develops into a beautiful tree with fragrant blossoms and juicy apples. In fact, you would produce a weak tree with small, unattractive fruit. An apple tree must be propagated by budding or grafting the desired cultivar onto rootstock and needs another apple or crabapple tree growing nearby to provide pollen for bees to pollinate it. Although Tidewater is not the ideal environment for commercial apple-growing, apple trees aren't too fussy about soil type. They won't survive in swampy areas and are not salt tolerant.

The chapter "Tree and Small Fruits" in "Home Gardening in Gloucester" updated for 2015 by the Gloucester Master Gardeners provides information on apple cultivars that will grow well on the Middle Peninsula. The book is available through Gloucester Master Gardeners. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-841 and Cornell University Ecogardening Factsheet #15 also offer information on apple growing for the home gardener.

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