

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

January 29, 2024

Essentials of Growing Apples

Apples are the popular choice for tree fruit to consider planting in your backyard. They are hardy for our climate and likely to produce quality fruit when meeting sound pollination, pruning, and pest management criteria. They also need full sunlight and grow in soils with decent drainage.

Pollination is essential to get fruit. Always plant at least two cultivars (or varieties) of apples to assure adequate pollination, as most apples do not accept their own pollen. For example, Red Delicious, McIntosh, or Cortland in an orchard would pollinate each other but do not pollinate themselves. Most crabapples will also pollinate apples. Pollinizers need to be within two hundred yards of each other to be effective. Do not worry about apple flavor changing by whatever pollen source pollinates your trees, as any genetic change only occurs in seeds, not the flesh of the apple.

When choosing apple cultivars, make sure they are hardy for northern Wisconsin and ripen by early fall. Cultivars such as Granny Smith may not have enough time to ripen here, and Jonathan is not considered winter hardy.

McIntosh, Cortland, and Honeycrisp are among the favorites well-suited for our area. Apples grafted on dwarf or semidwarf rootstocks are best for backyard orchards.

Pruning is a major ongoing requirement with apples. Apples need regular pruning to stay productive. Early on tree pruning provides a strong framework. Once trees start to produce fruit, pruning should promote horizontal branches, allow both air and light penetration into the tree canopy, and make pest management and harvesting easier. Dormant pruning is best; watch here for a column on apple pruning in February.

Pest management is the final major factor to assure quality apples. Major fungal disease concerns include apple scab, rust, and powdery mildew; along with the bacterial disease called firelight. There are disease resistant cultivars/varieties available; strongly consider them when choosing what trees to plant, especially for apple scab. Sanitation can help reduce disease. Fungicide sprays are another control option, and if used, fungicides must be applied in a timely manner to protect foliage and fruit.

Insects are the other pest management concern. Codling moth, apple maggot, and aphids are among the insect pest concerns. There are a variety of measures, both chemical and non-chemical, which can be used to combat these pests. Proper timing is critical.

If considering apples for your home orchard now is an ideal time for researching what to plant later this coming spring.

Interested in learning more about Horticulture in Iron County?
Feel free to contact:

Bruce Spangenberg
Horticulture Educator
Extension Iron County
300 Taconite Street, Suite 118
Hurley, WI 54534

Phone: 715-561-2695
Email: bruce.spangenberg@wisc.edu

