

“Strange Fruit—where apples came from and where they are going”



I was strolling through the Saturday Farmer’s Market, an ever-heavier bag looped over my arm, when the apples caught my attention. It was a radiant autumn morning, and in the cool sunlight, the sweet, thrilling apple scent attracted me more than anything else. I spied a long table, lined with bushel baskets filled to overflowing with Empires, Northern Spys, Macouns, Honeycrisps, Baldwins, and more.

As I inhaled, I saw that these apples were not all red, not all the same size, and certainly not all perfectly shaped. The iconic Red Delicious was missing. Good. I never liked that one. Shiny and bright red though it may be, its flesh is too often mushy and its flavor disappointing. I don’t believe I’ve ever even noticed its scent.

A dumb question for the apple vendor, whether at a farmer’s market or an apple orchard, is, “is it organic?” Truly organically grown apples are not common, because apple trees are notoriously susceptible to pests.

I bought some aromatic if imperfect-looking Macouns, and, wiping one on my jeans, took a big juicy bite.

“What is the parentage of this apple, do you know if it is one of those old-fashioned, heirloom apples?” I asked the farmer.

“Oh no,” replied the farmer promptly. “It’s a more-modern hybrid. One of its parents is the McIntosh.”

Considering it’s such a widely available and popular fruit, I realized that I actually knew very little about the apple, which led to a whole series of questions. Though widespread, is it American in origin? What about Adam and Eve, was that really an apple? Could apples have originated and been cultivated in the Middle East? Why is the apple so darn susceptible to pests? Are the older varieties somehow better? Is shiny red skin a modern “improvement”? And why did Johnny Appleseed distribute seeds (which never grow into a plant that looks like the parent plant)? and not grafted plants (which are clones of desirable varieties)?

The apple, it turns out, is not an American plant. It hails from Kazakhstan in Central Asia, where forests of them still grow on rugged hillsides. Their fruits are nothing like Red Delicious, or even Macoun, but instead—as is the way with wild plants—occur in various colors, odd shapes, and assorted sizes. Kazakhstan? Mountains? Centuries-old trees? I read that historians believe that the apple traveled from here into commerce in other parts of Asia and eventually Europe because it grew along the Silk Road. The Silk Road? Romantic images arose in my imagination...hearty, stomping horses and weary but adventurous travelers passing through magic forests adding strange fruits to their colorful woven saddlebags.

Maybe I've read too many fairytales, then, but the fact remains that *Malus sieversii*, the acknowledged ancestor of today's *Malus domestica*, grew and still survives on those untamed hillsides. Indeed, Phil Forsline, for years the curator of the world's largest collection of apple varieties in Geneva, New York, has traveled there repeatedly to collect seeds and cuttings (scions) at the scene of the original wild plants.

As for the Bible's apple of temptation, contrary to the prevalent impression and translation, not to mention depiction in art, it was very likely not a true apple. The Middle East is and was a drier, hotter place and nobody really believes apples grew in such a climate, in any real or imagined gardens.

A very scholarly book called *Plants of the Bible* compulsively reprints the iconic Adam and Eve painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder, complete with rosy apple and strategically placed fig leaves. (Interestingly, the original is housed, not far off in one of the great art museums of Europe, but in our very own Fogg Museum at Harvard University.) The author then goes on to remark that, "While tradition usually holds that it was the 'apple' (that is, apricot) which was 'the tree of knowledge' in the Garden of Eden, other legends say that this mythical tree was the fig.

The other most-famous of apple legends originates right here in this country, where the apple eventually traveled and was especially widely and enthusiastically distributed by John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed. A native of Leominster, Massachusetts (signs at the town line proudly announce this), he was born in 1774. Biographers speculate that he gained his interest in and expertise with growing orchard trees in his early years, and brought those skills with him when he "lit out for the territory" in his early 30s. He migrated with the waves of settlers pushing out into western Pennsylvania, the Ohio Valley and beyond. He lived till the ripe old age (in those days) of 70, planting and selling hundreds of thousands of apple trees along the expanding American frontier.

It's not puzzling that Chapman had apple seeds. Many worthy plants came over to the new land with the colonists, and apples had proven to be cold-hardy and productive in the Northeast by the time Chapman began promoting them to settlers further west. Nor is it puzzling that an adventurous young man could become accomplished in wilderness survival and travel, and that he moved about the landscape transporting seeds, which of course are easily portable, being so small and lightweight.

No, what is puzzling is that this farm boy dealt in seeds when he must've known that no two saplings would be alike.

A closer look at the diet of those times handily solves the mystery. In those days, apples weren't for eating. So uniformity or consistency weren't required, nor was beauty, redness, hand size, or the bold sweetness our modern palate demands of apples terribly important. The overwhelming use for apples was to make cider. It was easy, it was nutritious, it was common. Everyone drank cider, even children. And I'm not talking about the sweet-spicy elixir we enjoy every fall; remember, refrigeration didn't exist in the late 1700s and early 1800s. I'm talking about fermented apple juice. Hard cider, or applejack. This guy should've been called Johnny Applejack!

I recently spotted a book on cider-making at my local food coop, and paused over it. *Cider: Making, Using & Enjoying Sweet & Hard Cider*, written by Annie Proulx (before her Pulitzer Prize, presumably) with Vermont orchardist Lew Nichols, has all the information and recipes anyone could need to brew what early American settlers depended upon and savored, plus plentiful information and advice about cultivating a home orchard. In the introduction, I learned that when Whig candidate William Henry Harrison campaigned for president in 1840, couching himself as a man of the people, his signage showed a cider barrel and he magnanimously promised not a chicken in every pot, but cider in every cabin. This validates the importance of cider in our young country's history. Johnny Appleseed laid the groundwork for Harrison.

Enter the Temperance movement, refrigeration, the advent of other sources of sweet flavor and—as so often happens with popular plants—selection for preferred qualities, and cider began to drain away in popularity. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” may be so, but this slogan was originally created to encourage people to keep consuming apples as times changed. After a while, apples morphed from the source of a mildly alcoholic staple beverage into a wholesome, innocent, in-hand treat, generally how we view it to this day.

When public attention shifted to good eating apples, the plant's natural variability and ability to adapt to various climes and locales yielded a bounty of choices. There is an entertaining account of this in Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire*. As with heirloom vegetables, these were as diverse as their names:

Names that had the reek of the American 19th century, its suspender-popping local boosterism, its shameless Barnum-and-Bailey hype, its quirky, un-focus-grouped individuality. There were names that set out to describe, often with the help of a well-picked metaphor: the green-as-a-bottle Bottle Greening, the Sheepnose, the Oxheart, the Yellow Bellflower, the Black Gilliflower, the Twenty-Ounce Pippin. There were names that puffed with hometown pride, like the Westfield Seek-No-Further, the Hubbardston Nonesuch, the Rhode Island



Greening, the Albemarle Pippin...

Alas, also like many heirloom varieties of vegetables, most of these apples have slowly but surely fallen out of commerce as our country and the way we grow, ship, and market our food has changed. Tough skin that withstands jostling and resists bruising became a higher priority, as did uniform bright red color on the outside and white flesh on the inside. Most supermarkets offer mainly Red Delicious, McIntosh, and maybe Gala. Even my farmer's market guy doesn't offer an especially wide range of choices...not compared to what is possible.

Some heirlooms are wonderful—fragrant, funky-looking, and ambrosial. Some heirlooms are neither palatable nor pretty apples by modern standards, but perhaps their genes offer other valuable qualities such as ... pest resistance.

It's a very real possibility that apples are now in the same pickle as modern corn; the gene pool has become dangerously narrow. A pest or disease could appear and wipe out one or several of the few varieties favored these days. Already the ever-narrowing gene pool has—some biologists would contend, inevitably—over many long decades, allowed the rise of those nasty, feisty pests my friend Lew Nichols and other modern growers combat.

By this reasoning, the diversity that Johnny Appleseed dispersed so widely was a gift we Americans didn't truly appreciate at the time and maybe still don't. By this reasoning, the repository orchards in Geneva, New York, the plants that survive in the Kazahk forests, the preservation projects of foundations and museums dedicated to Johnny Appleseed, and the efforts of Phil Forsline and his colleagues and successors, are valuable indeed.

One uniform red apple is not the way to go. It is the way to squander a beloved, diverse, historically fascinating, and delicious fruit.

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