



Home harvests

FROM MARCH TO MAY APPLE TREES ALL AROUND THE COUNTRY ARE LADEN WITH COLOURFUL RIPENING FRUIT. MEANWHILE IT'S TIME TO GET PLANNING AND PLANTING. APPLES AND OTHER DECIDUOUS FRUIT TREES ARRIVE IN GARDEN CENTRES IN AUTUMN AND EARLY WINTER.

The fresher the fruit, the crunchier, sweeter and more nutritious it is. We have known for at least ten thousand years that the best way to eat an apple is straight from the tree - apples are deeply entwined in human history, art and mythology. Somewhere along the way, the apples that grew in the wild gave rise to the popular eating apple, *Malus domestica*, we all know today.

Since arriving in New Zealand with the missionary Samuel Marsden in 1819, apples have truly flourished. They are now our third biggest export fruit after grapes and kiwifruit. Our dynamic pipfruit industry has become a world leader and New Zealand born apple varieties are world famous.

It is our climates and soils that make New Zealand one of the best places in the world to grow apples and pears. While they are grown

throughout the country, Hawkes Bay, Nelson and Central Otago are our top apple regions.

Apples thrive in rich well drained soils where there are cool winters for winter chilling followed by warm springs and ample summer sun, ideally during a dry summer. Pests and diseases are more difficult to control when the growing season is wet.

Apples old and new

Of the many thousands of *Malus domestica* varieties available today, only a select few are considered worthy of mass production. As growers responded to market trends the number of varieties grown in commercial orchards has fallen dramatically over the years.

Leading varieties fill orchards and supermarket shelves but home gardeners need not be driven by what

sells best on supermarket shelves, travels well and produces the highest yield per hectare. There is a much wider choice of varieties to enjoy when you grow your own.

Among those who know that the tastiest cooking apple or the one that grows on the most disease resistant tree is not always the shiniest, there is rising interest in rekindling old and rare varieties.

Rescued from a very old tree in the Manawatu and now available in garden centres, apple 'Monty's Surprise' is hardy and versatile. The large late ripening fruit, pale green with a red stripe, is beautiful for cooking and found to be very high in health-boosting antioxidants. Another old favourite, 'Bramley's Seedling' was developed for lighter free-draining soils and is a great keeper, ripening mid to late season. Aromatic 'Belle de Boskoop', has russeted



skin that's not so eye-catching on modern shop shelves, but this heritage apple is well known for its firm crisp texture and full, tart flavour. It will keep for 3-4 months and gets sweeter with storage.

Orchard favourites that have been surpassed for export but still deservedly popular are sweet Golden Delicious and beloved tart Granny Smith with its bright shiny green skin. Granny Smith is one of the best for cooking and keeps well. As well, it is self fertile and an excellent pollinator for other apple varieties. Granny Smith originated from a chance seedling in Australia in 1868.

Originating in 1977, New Zealand's own Royal Gala holds its place as our number one export apple by volume and is regarded as one of the world's best and is a very popular garden apple too. Pretty to look at and sweet to eat, it is ready for picking early in the harvest season - by mid February.

Royal Gala first arose as a sport (random shoot) of the original Gala apple, born in Greytown in the 1930's as a seedling from a cross between a Golden Delicious and a Kidd's Orange Red.

A good selection of sought after apple varieties is available in leading garden centres. For those keen to search further afield, there is a daunting array of heritage varieties to explore.

Planning and planting

Taking the time to decide which apple trees to plant in a home garden is well worth the effort as trees will ideally grace your garden for decades. First, consider your climate. In a marginal climate outside major apple growing regions some varieties will be more

suitable than others. Talking to local gardeners and garden centre staff is a great place to start.

Consider which traits you care most about. Flavour? Disease resistance? Fruit size? Harvest time? Yield? Do you want apples for mainly cooking or eating fresh or both? If a long storage life is important, the late harvest apples generally have very good keeping qualities.

How tall do you want your tree to grow? Very dwarf trees can be harvested without a ladder. While some varieties are naturally compact growing, the potential height of any apple tree is influenced by the rootstock it is grafted onto.

Pollination is another important thing to check, when deciding which apple varieties to plant, especially if you only want to plant one or two trees. Some popular varieties, including Royal Gala, Golden Delicious, Bramley's and Granny Smith, are self-fertile but most are not. For trees that need cross pollination, failure to fruit happens if there is not a compatible pollinator tree within bees' flying distance. The wide range of pollinator options and other very useful information can be found on the Waimea Nurseries website, www.waimeanurseries.co.nz.

Plant your apple trees where there is plenty of sun and good well-drained soil. If the sunniest spot is along a fence, consider espaliering. To grow apples in a tight space, look to ultra dwarf trees or tall and narrow Ballerina apples. Avoid areas where the water puddles and don't plant too close to larger trees. If you have good sun but poor soil, look to dwarf apples for tubs.

Five ways to grow apples in a small garden

1 Dwarf trees

A dwarf fruit tree is a small tree that bears loads of normal sized fruit. Some, such as 'Blush Babe', are small because a compact growth habit is in their genes. Also, size is restricted when a tree is grafted onto a special 'dwarfing' rootstock.

2 Super slim

Ballerina apple trees are tall and narrow with masses of apples born on very short branches close to the main trunk. A great way to make the most of vertical space, they're easy to care for, require almost no pruning and are ideal for growing in containers.

3 Grow a 'family' tree

Plant three or four different apple trees of similar vigour very close together in one big planting hole. Choose trees on the same rootstock. Train them as if they were a single tree with an open centre to let the sun in. The roots of your trees will knit together as they grow, anchoring the family tree strongly in the soil. Fruit will be ready to pick over a longer period rather than a glut.

4 Espalier

Grow fruit trees in a two-dimensional space along a sturdy wire frame or against a wall. Creating and maintaining an espalier requires more training and pruning than a regular tree, but it's very satisfying if you have the time. The 'stepover' is a variation on espaliering whereby apples are trained as a low fence, traditionally as a border to a vegetable garden.

