



GARDEN NOTES

APPLES FROM B.C. TO Y2K

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Of all the fruit grown in Utah, apples are most closely tied to American history. Some even consider it to be an “All American” fruit. More apple trees are sold and bought than any other fruit tree. If a home has a fruit tree, chances are it’s an apple.

Apples first became famous in their alleged appearance in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. In King Solomon's day, apples were thought to have healing power. We still believe that today. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” is still recited by many mothers to their children, when they are looking for a sweet snack.

Apples are believed to have originated in Southwest Asia, Goodspeed explains. The first recorded use of apples was during the fourth Century B.C. Although the first apples were small and astringent, they were still treasured and propagated. Cato, who lived in the third Century B.C., wrote of the differences in several apple varieties. Apples eventually made their way to Europe where orchards were planted, and new varieties were discovered and propagated on a regular basis.

Many people also believe that apples saved the first American colonists who struggled to survive those first few years, he says. Apple trees were potted and brought on board many of the first ships coming to the New World. Apples provided a source of food and drink. Pilgrims stored apples for many months, which gave them some fruit during their long winters. By the 1650s, apple trees were being planted throughout the colonies.

The first apple tree nursery was planted in 1730 in New York, Goodspeed says. Many settlers, before moving west, gathered or bought apple trees or the scion wood for grafting. These trees traveled hundreds and sometimes more than a thousand miles in the back of covered wagons, before being planted.

By the late 1700s, many large apple orchards were established throughout the states, he says. The growers constantly bred and tried to develop new and better varieties. Two famous growers were Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. About this same time, Johnny Chapman, later known as Johnny Appleseed, began planting trees and seeds as he traveled from his home state of Pennsylvania to the West, Goodspeed adds. Years later, pioneers and settlers

survived on the small orchards and apple stands Johnny Appleseed had planted in Ohio, Indiana and as far west as Nebraska.

The first few pioneers entering the Salt Lake valley also carried apple trees, brought across the plains and over the Rockies in handcarts and wagons, he says. Planted immediately, these trees, just a few years later, helped the early settlers survive the harsh Utah winters.

The first apple trees in the Salt Lake valley were probably varieties such as Rhode Island Greening, Ben Davis, Spitzenburg, Cox Orange, Sweet Winesap and Roxbury Russet, he says. These varieties are now classified as old-time apples. A few growers throughout Utah still raise these apples, but newer varieties, developed in the past 50 years, have slowly replaced them.

“Today, there are too many varieties to count,” Goodspeed says. “There are more than 400 different strains of just the Red Delicious. Each variety has its own distinct taste, aroma, color and appeal. Everyone has their own favorite apple. I grow four of my favorites, Elstar, Jonagold, Mutsu and Jonalicious in my back yard.”

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