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Apples, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

The expression “as American as apple pie” represents an inaccurate history of both pie and apples. Apples are one of the most favored fruits in temperate regions around the world, and some cultures have been consuming the fruit for thousands of years. Far off in the nether regions of central Asia is where apples begin their humble and complicated journey, yielding innumerable heirloom varieties.

Apples (*Malus domestica*) are a member of the Rose (*Rosaceae*) family, and if you observe the flowers of both, you will notice a similarity in the basic five-petal structure, many stamens, and their ability to attract bees.

The genus *Malus* contains approximately 50 to 80 species grouped as a section, a series, species and then the cultivar or variety, such as McIntosh. Because there are numerous hybrids with wild species, as well as disagreement about various issues around the naming of the species, it can be confusing.

Apple Roots

Apples have been around for a long time. Their journey from wild plant to cultivar is so complex that botanists have not been able to fully unravel all the puzzle pieces, yet today they agree on the main points of the apple’s evolution.

Malus sieversii, the Central Asian wild apple from the “Stans” (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), is the main parent of the apple. The area holds a great apple diversity, both in wild species and domesticated forms. Specifically, the Tian Shan Mountains have recently been identified as the area where apples were domesticated.

As apple cultivation expanded in Europe, there was further crossing of apple species with European wild species, especially *Malus sylvestris*, with “new” and old cultivars, resulting in an even wider range of shapes and tastes, and forming the basis of the apples we know.

In North America, soon after the first colonists arrived on the East Coast, they began clamoring for the familiar fruits of Europe, especially familiar varieties of apples. Special containers were designed to transport the trees so they would not be destroyed by seawater. Orchards quickly became established in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and throughout the rest of the colonies. Native Americans soon adopted the apple and established their own orchards.

Growing Apples

Apples can grow in a wide array of climatic zones in temperate regions. They need adequate moisture, reasonable drainage, moderate summer temperatures, somewhat humid climate, and a cool or cold winter. Some apple varieties need less chilling time than others — that is, the

amount of hours below 45 degrees required for fruit to form the next year. Therefore, some varieties do better in warmer climates than others.

Apple stems with a few buds are grafted onto various types of rootstocks, which governs the ultimate size of the tree, its longevity, and maturation time to begin fruit production. Generally, small trees like dwarfs can bear fruit in a few years and are shorter lived, while standard full-size trees may take up to 10 years to bear fruit. Semi-standard trees will be smaller and can produce fruit earlier in their lifetime.

Heirlooms to Taste

For decades, heirloom apples took a backseat to some of the more modern varieties. Reasons for that are that they're not as reliably productive, they bear winter storage fruit later in the season, and they tend to have "off" years or alternative years where they do not bear as prolifically. The tendency can be compensated for through proper culture and pruning.

Sometimes they are not as disease resistant, although that is not always the case. I have seen many a neglected heirloom apple tree bearing almost blemish-free fruit.

Heirloom apples have the most amazing range of complex tastes. Each one has its unique qualities, and they are delicious. Assuming you are in a somewhat temperate climate — from about [USDA zones](#) 3 to 7 — there is a wide range of heirloom varieties that you may be able to grow.

Cooler microclimates within zones 8 and 9 may also support apples. Check with your local nursery or cooperative extension if you are not sure how well apples will fare in your area.

Because of the enormous range of cultivars, it is impossible to give you little more than a snapshot of what awaits you in the heirloom apple world.

Many of the oldest heirloom apples from North America came from the East Coast. The Baldwin apple originated around 1740 on the farm of John Ball near Lowell, Massachusetts. It was known as "Woodpecker" or "Pecker" because the tree was frequented by these birds. Col. Baldwin of Woburn became aware of this apple and propagated it widely by 1784, and it came to be named after him.

Baldwin was a popular apple and widely grown in orchards well into the 20th century. The fruit is bright red, sometimes speckled, with thick skin, medium to large, and yellowish flesh of excellent, slightly tart flavor. Baldwin is a general purpose apple and good for long keeping.

Another great apple is Esopus or Esopus Spitzenburg, which came from the Hudson Valley, Ulster County, of New York state, in the late 18th or early 19th century. The fruit is of good size, somewhat oblong to conic, relatively tough, and with a rich red skin marked by yellow and russet flecks. The flesh is [crisp](#), slightly tart and juicy. It too is a long-keeper. Spitzenburg became popular in the Northwest and was extensively planted in the Hood River Valley in the early 1900s.

Rhode Island Greening is another classic New England apple, the tree originating around 1650 at Green's Inn near Newport. The Greenings are a group of apples, and this one is the most well-

known. The fruit is large and green, often with a yellowish blush. The flesh is a pale yellow-green and is crisp and tart. It is traditionally thought of as a cooking apple and makes excellent [pies](#), and it also makes for good fresh eating, although its flavor is not as complex as some other types. The fruit is large, roundish to oblate.

Black Oxford hails from Oxford County, Maine, around 1790. This outstanding fruit is medium size, rounded, and a dark purplish-black color. Another great storage apple, they make good sauce, [cider](#) and pies. It is a very good apple that is not as well-known outside of Maine.

Another apple with beautiful coloration, the Arkansas Black came from Benton County, Arkansas.

The fruit is dark purplish-red, skin waxy, relatively round with deep cream firm flesh, crisp with a good balance of acid and sweet taste. The fruit keeps well and makes an excellent cider.

Wealthy is a hardy apple originating in Minnesota, which came from seed of the Cherry Crab from Bangor, Maine, before 1869. Wealthy is a great apple and should be more widely grown.

Its fruit is medium in size, relatively round to oblate with a thin skin, and it ranges from yellowish-green overlaid with red stripes to very red. The fruit is white, sometimes red stained, crisp, juicy, a bit acidic, with all-around excellent taste.

It is great for cider, fresh eating and cooking, and it stores into early winter.

Gravenstein was first imported around 1826 to the vicinity of Albany, New York. It likely originated in Germany in the 18th century where it was a common apple, and it eventually made its way to England. Russian settlers may have brought it with them around 1865 when they settled in the Sebastopol region of California, and it remains a well-known apple in Northern California and the Northwest.

The fruit ranges from medium to large, round to oblate, greenish to orange-yellow with stripes of light and dark red. The fruit is relatively firm. Gravenstein is distinctly a summer apple, ripening in August and September in California, a bit later in the Northeast. When fresh, it has excellent taste, but it does not keep long. Used extensively for apple juice, it also makes good sauce and fresh eating.

A sport of Gravenstein, Red Gravenstein, is a bit sweeter with a thicker skin.

A true California apple is Hauer Pippin, which dates to the 1890s from Aptos, Santa Cruz County, where it was extensively grown. The story associated with this apple is that Peter Hauer discovered a seedling growing on the side of the road, possibly a cross of Cox Orange Pippin, a wonderful English variety, and Yellow Bellflower. He began to propagate it.

The fruit was considered so good and long-keeping that it was commercially shipped to England, arriving in March. It ripens late as well. The fruit is round to oblate with creamy flesh and thin skin that is greenish with a deep red blush and white spots. The fruit is juicy, sweet and crisp. It makes great cider and is both a good eating and cooking apple.

Sierra Beauty is a fairly rare apple today, first discovered in the 1890s on the slopes of the Sierra Mountains and recently rediscovered. It is fairly large with green and yellow skin, which is red striped or blushed red. The flesh is crisp, juicy and tart, and it is an excellent keeper.

Of much more recent vintage is Pink Pearl, another California original, bred in 1944 by Albert Etter. It has unusual pearly translucent yellow skin with mostly distinctive pink flesh. Their flavor ranges from somewhat sweet to tart, and they are especially good for [baking](#) or pink sauce.

Expand your apple horizons with these heirlooms, whether you grow fruit trees or just enjoy eating a crisp, flavorful apple. With so much time between planting an apple tree and getting fruit, it's best to get out to the farmers' markets and fresh markets to try as many varieties as possible.