

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



January 20, 2024

Considerations for Growing Apple Trees in the Backyard

Picking ripe apples from a tree in the backyard would be satisfying. Before planting apple trees, consider the growing conditions needed and time necessary to manage them to produce quality apples. Also, ask yourself if you have the time and commitment required to prune the trees annually and apply fungicides frequently throughout the growing season.

Growing conditions needed to successfully produce apples include well-drained soil of adequate depth; location where the air does not stagnate to avoid late spring frosts; location in full sun; varieties of apples adapted to Kentucky; varieties with some disease resistance; adequate control of weeds, diseases, and insects; and time to give your apple orchard the care it needs. By not meeting these requirements, you may be disappointed with the results.

Note that earlier maturing apples are generally harvested before serious pest problems develop. Earlier maturing varieties also require fewer applications of fungicides and insecticides than later maturing ones because of the shorter ripening time period. Generally, after the apples have been picked, fungicide and insecticide applications stop.

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To help reduce the risk of loss from apple diseases and the time needed to apply fungicides, Dr. Nicole Gauthier, University of KY Extension Plant Pathology Specialist, suggests planting disease resistant varieties. The common diseases with severe impact on apple trees and the fruit include fire blight, apple scab, cedar apple rust, and powdery mildew. By planting disease resistance varieties, their care is a little easier in regard to disease control as compared to other varieties. Some of the minimal pesticide varieties, which usually mature their fruit with fewer pesticide applications, are listed in this article.

A term to look for in the description of an apple cultivar regarding diseases is *resistant*. Resistant means that the cultivar has the ability to limit, entirely or to some degree, the development of the disease-causing organism. A minimal pesticide variety example is Pristine. It matures in early to mid-July and makes excellent applesauce. Skin color is light yellow with a red blush. Pristine is very resistant to apple scab.

Redfree is a firm, juicy summer apple maturing around the middle to end of July. The skin color is red. It is very resistant to apple scab and cedar apple rust.

Liberty has fruit similar to McIntosh. It is crisp, juicy, with a yellowish flesh, red skin, and tart flavor at harvest. This variety matures in late August to early September. Liberty is very resistant to apple scab, and resistant to cedar apple rust and fire blight.

Spartan is a firm McIntosh-type apple. The number of fruit must be reduced through thinning to develop size. The apple skin color is dark red to pale red depending on the weather. The fruit stores well until January. Spartan is resistant to cedar apple rust and powdery mildew. It is moderately resistant to apple scab and fire blight.

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Jonafree's fruit is similar to Jonathan but has less acid. Skin color is red. Jonafree matures in late August to early September. This variety is very resistant to apple scab and resistant to powdery mildew.

Pixie Crunch is small, sweet flavored, and super crisp. The size is just right for kids. The skin color is deep red. It matures in early September. Pixie Crunch is very resistant to apple scab.

Crunch-A-Bunch™ is a yellow apple with a sweet tart flavor and crisp. Storage of this apple is excellent. It matures in early September. This apple is resistant to scab and fire blight.

WineCrisp is a dark red apple that can be used for cooking and eating fresh. It matures in early October. It is very resistant to apple scab and fire blight, and moderately resistant to cedar apple rust and powdery mildew. This variety stores well.

After reading about the characteristics of the different apple varieties, choose one that is resistant to as many of the four main diseases as possible and has the flavor and texture you prefer. Keep in mind that fungicides and insecticides are still needed to produce the perfect apple.

Next, be sure to check the requirements for cross-pollination and maturity dates of the selected varieties. Usually, two varieties are required for pollination and fruit set. In many instances, you can use a flowering crabapple, which may already exist in the landscape, as an apple pollinator if their bloom periods overlap. Otherwise, allow room for two different apple tree varieties.

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January is a good time to order apple trees for planting in March and early April as bare root plants.

The Cooperative Extension Service has a list with more recommended disease resistant apple varieties. In addition, disease and insect management information is available under UK publication number PPFS-FR-T-21 called “Backyard Apple and Pear Disease, Pest, and Cultural Practices Calendar” at <https://plantpathology.ca.uky.edu/files/ppfs-fr-t-21.pdf>. Another publication gives a list of catalog sources for specific apple varieties https://www.uky.edu/hort/sites/www.uky.edu.hort/files/documents/HortFact_3002_2020.pdf.

For more information on producing apples in the backyard, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette’s tip:

If you have a choice, north or east facing slopes make good orchard sites because they have good air flow and are cooler later in the spring; thus, bloom is delayed and there is less chance of frost or freeze injury during bloom.

Upcoming Events:

For commercial vendors and small businesses, “Emerging Marketing Approaches and Opportunities for Farmers’ Markets” is scheduled for January 25 at 6:00 p.m. at the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service office. New tools for selling local products to local market patrons will be covered.

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