

October 2006 – Apples for Deer

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Nothing remains static. I evolved from growing apples for people 15 years ago to growing apples for wildlife today. What's the difference? Its huge. My home orchard in 1986 had Lodi, Golden Delicious and Red Delicious apple trees. Today at a new site, I don't have an orchard, more like a few small groupings of 3 or 4 trees each of Yates, Arkansas Black, Limbertwig and others. Believe me, if you use the right varieties, its much easier to grow apples for deer (and you can eat some too!) than it is for people. Instead of spraying insecticides and fungicides every 10 days on people varieties, my current worries with growing apples for deer are limited to droughts (very tough on young seedlings) and beavers (very tough on all trees).

Origin/Description

Apples are in the same family as roses. There are over 7,000 varieties of apples in the world and over 2,500 in the U.S. Many came from Canada or New Zealand but some are native to the U.S. Climate and selecting the proper variety are more important than soil in determining where apples will grow successfully. They do well between Georgia and New Mexico, Maine and Wisconsin and the southern parts of Canada (apples need 900-1,000 hours below 45o to flower and fruit properly but severe cold (-45o or colder will kill them). Top apple states are Washington, New York, California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

There is an ongoing controversy among deer biologists whether apples are just “ice cream” or “candy” in the diet of deer versus an important component of the fall diet. I believe the latter. With production of more than 800 lbs/tree and an analysis of 22 grams of carbohydrates and 16 grams of sugar (80 calories) average per apple, the impact of only 8 or 10 trees can be significant to a local deer herd. Besides, they make an excellent place to bow hunt or gun hunt.

Varieties/Establishment

Use adapted varieties and avoid bargains! Never buy wildlife apple trees from a supermarket or discount chain store. Check with your local county extension agent or wildlife biologist for best varieties adapted to your areas. A smart plan is to select varieties that mature in early season (July-August), mid-season (September) and late-season (October) to have a constant supply even into winter. However, emphasize late season varieties for deer that hang on limbs longer, resist rot, and persist into winter. Always plant disease resistant varieties, never plant the following for wildlife unless you love to do a lot of chemical spraying: Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, McIntosh, Idared, Jonathan, Granny Smith, Jonagold, Rome or Crispin. Do plant the following disease resistant varieties if they are adapted to your area: Liberty (very resistant to disease, good eating), Limbertwig (late-very good keeper), Freedom, Jonamac, Macoun (mid-season, excellent eating), Keepsake, Enterprise, Williams Pride, Gold Rush, Burgandy, Arkansas Black (late season, good keeper, great eating), horse apple (early, yellow, tart), Padukah (early, very hardy), Yates (late, small, good keeper, good eating). Whatever your choice, most varieties need to be grouped (3 or 4 trees, 15 feet apart) with other varieties for best cross-pollination. Fall planting (November or December) is practical in the South; very early spring (as soon as ground is dry enough to work) works best in the North. Always plant apple trees in full sunlight. Pick a spot with good air drainage, neither on a wind-blown hilltop nor in a frost pocket valley. Dig a large hole; add lime (if needed) but not manure or fertilizer. Put topsoil in bottom of hole, bring in good soil or potting soil, if needed. Water thoroughly and pack soil firmly. Use semi-dwarf or standard size trees for deer - dwarf trees are too vulnerable to browsing. Immediately protect newly planted seedlings with plastic tree shelters to prevent browsing and possible antler rubbing. As trees mature, switch to wire cages to protect from antler rubbing.

Management

For deer, no need to prune much, especially in early years. The tree should be trained in the first year or two to develop into its proper shape. Prune in late winter or early spring. Summer pruning of small twigs helps keep tree size down. Beginning with the second year, apply fertilizer annually about two weeks before bloom. Use 10-10-10 at 1 lbs/tree multiplied by the number of years the tree has been set but never more than 6 lbs per tree. Scatter fertilizer under the outer parts of the branches.

Keep woody and herbaceous competition away from trees using mechanical means or chemicals. Having selected the correct varieties, you should not have to deal with fireblight, apple scab or powdery mildew. You will still have to watch for bad insect infestations by codling moth, tent caterpillars, aphids, mites and borers. In some cases, insecticides may be necessary.

In summary, choosing the correct variety goes a long way toward winning the apple wars. Other key factors for success include tree shelters, air drainage, fertilizer (beginning in second year), group planting, and conservative pruning. By the way, there are no rules against eating a few apples yourself!

Article was taken from the National [QDMA forums](#).



Liberty Apples Photo courtesy of Bill Mayo of Sandy Bay Orchard Franklin, Vermont.