

Apples: Which Varieties to Grow

Selecting a variety of apple that will do well in your garden is key to successful growing

The Victorians took the apple, that ancient symbol of love and fertility, very seriously. Woodside Walled Garden in the Borders boasts an apple walk, with a wide selection of varieties impeccably arranged. Eaters to the left and cookers to the right were planted so that the earliest varieties were closest to the entrance while the last to be harvested were at the top of the walk. These apples were cosseted within the micro climate of a walled garden which enjoys a temperature 2°C higher than outside the walls. Sadly, those of us without a walled garden must have a much narrower choice of varieties.

Make your choice in the autumn as nurseries will start distributing bare root trees in November and if you want to be sure of getting precisely what you want, it'll pay to get the order in soon. When making your selection, you should ask two questions. What varieties are known to do well in Scotland and, more precisely, my part of Scotland? And how big do I want the tree to be? When we planted our orchard 30 years ago, we recognised that our particular location – with an altitude of 200 metres – massively reduced our choice. In fact, apart from 'Worcester Pearmain' and 'James Grieve', few eaters had much chance of succeeding. Meanwhile, quarter of a century later, admittedly in a slightly more sheltered spot, 'Ellison's Orange' and 'Egremont Russet' work a treat, so I suppose there's something to be said for a warming climate.

Whatever your selection in these balmy days, it's just as important to remember that an apple tree needs a neighbouring one to be in flower at the same time to ensure pollination. I know one woman who enthusiastically planted a solitary tree, waited expectantly for several years till, in frustration, she cut the poor thing down as it had borne no fruit.

In determining which of the 6,000 known apple varieties will do in your region, temperature and climate are the key factors. Very low spring temperatures or late frosts can wreak havoc on blossom and newly forming fruit, so early flowering varieties or trees planted in frost pockets will be at risk. Apples flower over a 40 day stretch and, during this period, each variety has an optimum date in the middle of one week for pollination. So varieties like 'Crawley Beauty', which is at its best on day 29, has good frost resistance. But confusingly, other varieties, such as 'Golden Spire', can still cope with frost even though they do flower early. All this means you need advice in selecting which tree to go for! And at the other end of the growing season, apples need sun and warmth to ripen properly, as do next year's fruiting buds. So, a cool, cloudy autumn will prevent you enjoying sweet apples and could reduce next year's harvest. When you consider that the average July temperature for Edinburgh is 2.7°C lower than London's and Cape Wrath is 5.2°C below London, it's pretty obvious why we can grow fewer varieties. The archetypal English Cox's Orange Pippin, for example grows beautifully down south, but we should stick to Sunset, the 'Scottish Cox'. Early and mid season apples have a much better chance of ripening well in our northern climes.

Wind and rain are also very important. Pollinating insects are unlikely to do their work when it's either very windy or raining constantly and this will naturally lead to a poor crop. If you live in the east, you may have an annual rainfall of around 60cm, while the west can notch up four times that. These high levels provide good breeding ground for scab and canker, and while careful management will reduce these problems, you could also consider selecting varieties, like 'Grenadier' which has good scab and canker resistance or reliable and healthy varieties like 'Worcester Pearmain' and 'Ribston Pippin'.

While there's nothing we can do about rainfall, we can at least moderate the evil effects of damaging gales. The key is to choose a sheltered spot and avoid exposed sites, facing towards the blustery south west – the source of most of our gales. If you don't have anywhere suitable, you will need to plant a hedge or build a permeable fence to allow some wind to pass through – solid barriers don't stop the wind and actually cause more turbulence. I've been amazed at the whirling strength of the wind inside a walled garden: the walls actually make things worse!

The most important thing, when selecting apple varieties, is to try to match your site with varieties that are likely to do well there. The best all-round eaters are: 'Charles Ross', 'Discovery', that delicious 'Ellison's Orange', with the largest fruit I've ever seen, and 'Worcester Pearmain'. Good cookers are: 'Bramley's Seedling', 'Early Victoria', 'Grenadier', 'Lord Derby' and 'White Melrose', which always produces large, crisp apples for me, even if they're not good keepers.

Having selected an apple you like and will work for you, the next and just as important stage is choosing a rootstock for growing the tree. There are several different rootstocks, ranging from the very dwarfing M27 to the large M111, that control the height of the tree. Again, there are different ways of pruning your tree from cordon to bush. So between rootstock and pruning methods, you can make sure your apples fit into your garden, however small it is.

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