

HOME & GARDEN

Apples: most delicious and often diseased

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In spite of all the trouble Adam and Eve had with the apple at the beginning of time, the apple today is one of our most popular and favored fruits. It is still giving us trouble, however, for even as we find it delicious, so do a number of diseases.

Apple scab is one of the most prevalent diseases that can attack the apple. It is a fungus that flourishes in damp weather. Scab first appears on the underside of leaves and when severe enough it can cause the leaves to blacken and fall off. Brown or blackish spots can then appear on the fruit. It may limit itself to blemishes on the skin, not seriously damaging the fruit, or it may be so severe that the young fruit becomes misshapen and falls prematurely. The disease is caused by spores and can overwinter and continue to infect the tree the following season. Not only is the fruit damaged or destroyed, scab

will sap the strength and vigor of the tree.

Cedar apple rust is another fungal disease that lives one period of its life on the red cedar and then the spores are carried to nearby apple trees. The apple leaves become marked with orange splotches and the spores that develop there reinfect the red cedars and the cycle is kept going. The disease weakens the tree and the fruit that is formed is underized and apt to drop before maturity.

Still another fungus that can destroy the apple is powdery mildew. It causes the leaves to look as though they had been dusted with a grayish white powder and the fruit is marked with fine lines of russet. They may also be underized and cracked.

Fire blight is a serious bacterial disease that can affect pear and quince and other trees as well as the apple. The leaves turn brown and shrivel up. A sticky white ooze may appear on the leaf stems. This disease progresses

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rapidly and new growth is particularly susceptible — a reason not to overfertilize young fruit trees. A tree can be killed in just a matter of weeks if the infection is severe.

Naturally there are remedies for these diseases and commercial growers usually employ an extensive and regular preventative spray program that begins before the blossoms open and ends about three weeks before harvest.

Some standard varieties of apple do have some resistance to these diseases. Jonathan, McIntosh and Northern Spy are somewhat resistant to fire blight. McIntosh, Delicious and Golden Delicious have shown some resistance to powdery mildew.

It seems to me that one of the advantages of a backyard "orchard" is that the homeowner can do away with the practice of automatically and continually spraying poison on his trees and still harvest healthy and acceptably attractive fruit.

The first step towards this goal is the selection of disease resistant varieties. Fortunately this is a problem that has been attacked by plant breeders and developers.

In 1945 Purdue and the University of Illinois started a program to breed disease resistant apples and in 1950 they were joined by Rutgers. The fruits of their labors (pardon the pun) bear the acronym PRI in their names.

Sir Prize is russet free, immune to scab and resistant to powdery mildew. It needs to be planted with Prima and Priscilla because it will not pollinate other varieties and all three need cross pollination to set fruit.

Prima is highly resistant to scab, fire blight and mildew. It ripens in late August and will keep for three months under proper conditions.

Priscilla is the apple that we planted when we lived in Maine. The damp Maine climate makes scab a particular problem and Priscilla is extremely resistant to scab, fire blight and cedar apple rust.

These three apples are available in standard or dwarf sizes.

The newest disease resistant apple was developed by the New York State Experiment Station in Geneva. It was first crossed in 1955 and first released in 1978. It is supposed to be the most disease resistant apple of all. It is immune to scab and cedar apple rust, and resistant to fire blight and mildew. Liberty ripens in early September and is good for eating out of hand, cooking and canning.

Stark's Bros. Nurseries and Or-

chards, Louisiana, Mo. 63353 is the only nursery I have found this spring that offers all four of these varieties. Kelly Bros. Nurseries Inc., Dansville, N.Y. 14437 lists a semi-dwarf Liberty apple but stock is already sold out for this year.

There are many things to consider when choosing apple varieties to grow for the family including flavor, texture, ripening dates, whether it is good for cooking or preserving as well as how well and long it will keep. One other important consideration should be what variety can be grown most easily and healthily in the backyard.

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Since I wrote my column of garden catalogs I have learned about another local nursery, Gladside Garden, 61 Main St., Northfield 01360. They offer a large selection of bulbs as well as some dahlias, canna, succulents and cactus. Their price list costs \$1. and this is credited towards the first order.