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Hello Fruit Growers!

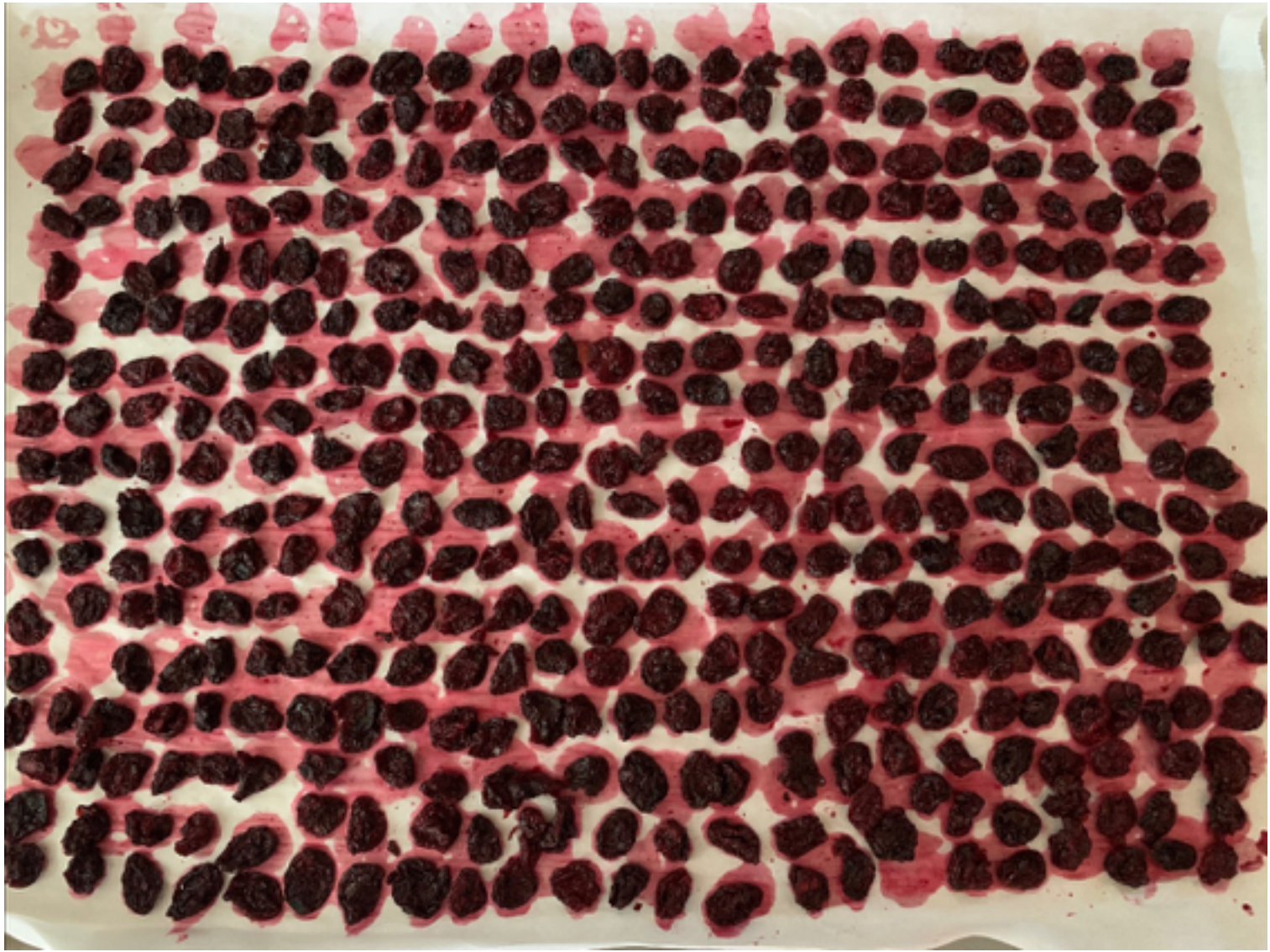
The shortening days always seem to surprise me. As we move towards Winter Solstice and our dwindling periods of daylight, I find that I am constantly thinking about next year's growing season! I was interviewed for [The Food Garden Life Show](#) blog, and the host asked me about the growing culture in Alaska. I responded that I thought that people's interest in gardening or growing fruit was in a sense, directly proportional to the amount of winter they experienced. Before I came to Alaska, I lived in the Bay area where you could virtually grow anything, but most people grew nothing. Contrast that with Alaska, and you, my fellow fruit growers!

Catalogs make for fun reading in the winter. One of my favorites is [Fedco](#) from Maine. I have ordered scion wood from them, as they have heirloom varieties and every one of them has a little story or background. It is from Fedco that I ordered Red Astrachan (photo above) scion, one of the four hardy Russian heritage apples brought to the United States in 1835 that have provided the genetics for most of the apples we value today. I harvested my first two Red Astrachan this fall. They were large, dense apples, tinged with pink under the skin, with a brix of 14, but quite sharp (acidic). They are highly recommended for cooking and I can see how they would make an excellent pie, especially if mixed with a sweet/low acid variety. My suspicion is that they will make a wonderful dried apple, but that test will need to wait until next year when I have a few more apples.

Former APFGA President Kevin Irvin shared with me that [St Lawrence Nursery](#) in Potsdam, New York is back with a 2023 catalog. Bill MacKentley (old owner) is serving as advisor for the new owner Connor Hardiman. It is from St. Lawrence Nursery that I purchased my first Evans cherry tree on its own rootstock. That original tree at our former house produced a sucker that I planted in our orchard on our current property. I brought some of the 30 lbs of cherries from that tree to the early fruit tasting. In our climate, I believe it to be superior to the grafted Evans trees that I later purchased from Costco. With our wet end-of-season weather, the Evans cherries grown on Evans rootstock produced a firmer cherry. It was these cherries that I chose to use as I continued with my experiments dehydrating cherries since a firmer cherry holds its shape better when drying.

My one problem with dried sour cherries is that I find them a bit too tart *au natural*. However, I think I have that figured out. I start with frozen pitted cherries in quart containers that I thaw overnight and put in a colander to drain in the morning until lunch. I put the drained cherries in a bowl and pour sugar over them at the rate of ¼ cup for each quart I took out of the freezer. That of course draws out more liquid and dissolves the sugar as the cherries are gently mixed. I leave the cherries to sit in the sugar mixture for the rest of the day stirring occasionally.

Then, they are put back into the colander to drain for a couple of hours before laying them out on a baking sheet in the evening. I like to put them on parchment paper so they release easily, and then I put them into my oven on the dehydrator setting. It takes about 7 – 8 hours in our oven to dry the cherries to the point that they are like raisins (photo below). Less than this and they may not be dry enough to keep well. Dryer than this and they are hard and not very palatable in the mouth. Five 1-quart containers of frozen pitted cherries will reduce to fit in a one-quart zip-lock bag when dried.



Ovens with a convection fan often have a dehydrator option and can hold much more than a counter-top dehydrator. One can easily load three large cookie sheets of apple slices, cherries, mushrooms, or whatever else at one time into an oven. I mention this should you be thinking about taking advantage of the climate change tax rebates included in the [Inflation Reduction Act](#). If you are purchasing an induction range/electric oven for example, check to see if it has a convection oven setting and thus hopefully, a dehydrator option.

The by-product of drying cherries results in a good amount of unsweetened cherry juice, and some sweetened cherry juice. This can be kept frozen and used later to make wine, beverages, or to drink fresh. For my taste, I find that tart cherry juice sweetened to a brix of 15 or 16 is quite drinkable and a rather decadent substitute for orange juice. This is accomplished by adding the sweetened juice to the unsweetened juice until it suits your taste. It is my opinion that the cherry juice is more interesting at room temperature, so I will microwave my glass of juice a short while if it has just come out of the refrigerator. Like a good red wine, the subtleties of flavor are more apparent at room temperature. The sweetened cherry juice (or any juice for that matter) can also be used to make carbonated drinks with a [SodaStream](#).

Now, onto some important business. Next week Thursday, on December 8, at 7:00 pm, we will have our first winter program of the season! We are thrilled to have soil scientist Bob Vanveldhuizen give a presentation on Alaska soils, testing, and interpretation and answer any questions that you might have on the topic. Click the link on December 8 at 7:00 pm to [join the meeting](#) on Zoom. If needed, here is the full [Zoom invitation](#).

The following week on December 15, at 7:00 pm we will have a Board of Directors meeting. You are welcome to click the link to [join the meeting](#) on Zoom at the appropriate date and time. Here are links to the [minutes](#) from the last meeting and the proposed [agenda](#).

Hope to see you for Bob's presentation on December 8!

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA

