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Hello Fruit Growers!

Our refrigerator has finally run out of apples from our harvest last season. Consequently, my wife Miok was kind enough to pick up a box of Washington Opal apples from Costco. Opals (photo above) can go soft at room temperature, so I was pleased when she said she looked for a “cold box.”

The Opal apple, if kept refrigerated, is a personal favorite. It is crisp and juicy with a bright, clean flavor, has a small core, and the flesh resists browning when cut. I cleaned an apple for breakfast and was struck by how sweet it was. It actually seemed too sweet, if that's possible. I suspect that I have become accustomed to apples with a more modest brix (sugar content) of around 12 or 13. In contrast, the Opal apple was a sugar bomb with a brix of 16 (!). I guess you know you are an apple nerd when your first response to trying an apple is to reach for your [brix refractometer!](#)

It won't be long and we will be doing our dormant pruning and harvesting [scion wood](#) for grafting. So, I have been refreshing my knowledge and making sure I have my tools ready to go. I belong to the North American Fruit Explorers ([NAFEX](#)) and recently watched a webinar by Lee Reich on pruning fruit trees and bushes. Lee is an author of a number of books including [The Pruning Book](#), [Landscaping with Fruit](#), and [Grow Fruit Naturally](#).

Lee reinforced what February's speaker, Katrina Mendrey, shared with us about understanding the difference between heading cuts and thinning cuts when pruning. Here is the link if you missed Katrina's presentation last month on [Growing Backyard Fruit Trees from Establishment to Production](#). For more resources on pruning, Katrina highly recommended the book, [Pruning and Training](#) by Christopher Brickell and David Joyce published by The American Horticultural Society. If you are in the Deiser's experimental group of short season grape growers, you might also check out the University of Minnesota's [grape pruning resources](#).

In his NAFEX presentation, Lee Reich also shared his thoughts about what he liked in regards to pruning equipment. Although there are lots of great pruners and loppers on the market, he said he liked pruners by ARS, a Japanese company that I hadn't heard of. In looking at their products, I liked the look of their [Signature Heavy Duty Pruner](#) and the [Thinning Scissors](#) looked like a handy tool for quickly hand thinning apples. For loppers, his stated preference was for those made by Fiskar.

My loppers have been pretty abused from removing trees and cutting cottonwood roots. It is true that they have hit more than the occasional rock. I recognize that clean cuts heal better, so I purchased a new [Fiskar bypass lopper](#) with fairly long handles (32") and a power gear that will be only for use on the fruit trees. In general, I prefer bypass cutters over anvil cutters. The latter can have a tendency to crush or bruise a branch. If you just need a small set of loppers for occasional use, Costco will have them on sale after March 9.

To get everyone refreshed on their pruning skills, APFGA will be holding two pruning workshops. The first will be a “hands on” workshop at Boyer's Greenhouse in Anchorage on Saturday, March 26 starting at 1:00 pm (click link for [directions](#)). We will take you through the basics of pruning established fruit trees and then we will work our way through the greenhouse practicing what we have learned while pruning the rest of the trees. Bring your pruners and work gloves.

The second workshop will be the following day on Sunday, March 27 at 2:00 pm at the Mid-Valley Garden & Greenhouse in Wasilla (click link for [directions](#)). Expert grower Dan Elliot will provide instruction on how to prune and train young nursery trees. That class would have been particularly useful 10 years ago when we were buying and planting our ornamental crabs!



Last week with the warmer temperatures I waded out into the orchard. I say waded because the snow was still up to my knees. The last snows had topped my rodent screens so I decided to compress the snow again around the trees. The recent bouts of warmer temperatures had created a mid-level crust in the snow pack that allowed a void to form near the orchard floor. I used my hoe and pushed all the way down around the screen to collapse the hollow forming near the ground (photo above). Voles like to take the path of least resistance. Stomping down the snow around the plants that you want to protect is just one more way to keep the critters at bay.

Should you find recent vole damage, and the tree is not completely girdled, you can often save the tree and prevent a permanent wound by covering the chewed area with silicon. The silicon provides a covering and prevents the few remaining exposed cambium cells from drying out and dying. Overtime, these plant cells will differentiate and rebuild the phloem/bark on the outside of the tree. The best practice, as Dan Elliot recommends, is to use white silicon because it will reflect sunlight. In a pinch, I have used clear silicon with good results as well.

Next Thursday, March 10, at 7:00 pm, I will be the presenter for our last monthly program of the winter. The title of my presentation is: "From Bud to Fruit: Surviving Cold – Requiring Heat." The program uses temperature data captured last year in our East Anchorage orchard to discuss the mechanisms that lead to fruit tree flower bud initiation and cold survival, along with an explanation of heat-units and the amount needed to ripen fruit.

Essentially, my presentation is all about heat or the absence thereof, and how it affects our fruiting trees and bushes as seen through the temperature lens of last winter and summer. I hope to inspire APFGA members to install temperature loggers so we can begin building more data about what we can realistically grow in the many climates and micro climates of Alaska. Click the link to join the program, "[From Bud to Fruit](#)" at 7:00 pm on March 10. If needed, you can click the following link for the full [Zoom invitation](#).

Feel free to share the link with anyone you think might be interested and invite them to join APFGA! If you miss the presentation, it will be posted the following week on the [APFGA website](#) under the "Research" tab in the folder "Meeting Program Slides & Video."

The APFGA Board of Directors (BOD) is moving forward with planning for a Grafting Workshop on Saturday, April 23, in the Anchorage Begich Middle School All-Purpose Room. Set-up will be at 10 am and we'll finish at 3 pm. We are looking for volunteers to help. Some of the many tasks include helping with set-up, admission, grafting instruction, scion wood, rootstock distribution, and clean-up. Please email [Doug Damberg](#) if you are willing to help. We will share more information as we get closer to the date.

In May, we will hold a top-working workshop for the club that demonstrates how to graft to an existing mature tree. Top-working is a way to add varieties, or even change over the tree. Because the tree is already established the grafts grow relatively quickly. We are looking for trees to demonstrate on. If you have an ornamental Amur Chokecherry (*Prunus maackii*), they can be great platforms for edible cherries. Or maybe you planted an apple tree that had a variety that never ripens or doesn't produce good fruit. Or perhaps you would like some edible apples on your crab tree. If so, [email me](#) and we'll come take a look to see if your tree is a good candidate for the workshop.

The next meeting of the Board of Directors is by Zoom on Thursday, March 24, at 7:00 pm. Members are always welcome to attend the board meetings. The following are links for the [Full Zoom BOD Invitation](#), [agenda](#), and [minutes](#) from the February 24, BOD meeting.

Hope to see you for my presentation on March 10, at 7:00 pm.

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA

