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Hello Fruit Growers!

The first fall Apple/Fruit tasting will be this Sunday, September 11, from 1:00 – 2:30 pm at Anchorage [Begich Middle School](#). The event is free and open to the public. Please invite your friends and neighbors to sample some of the excellent fruit grown locally and now being harvested. (Photo above: Ft. Mac/Mac apples hanging like ornaments in rare sunshine!)

We encourage you to bring samples of your apples and any other fruits that you are picking. Those bringing fruit should arrive at 12:30 pm to set your fruit out. There will be numbered paper plates for you to write the variety, your name, and general growing location before putting your fruit on the plate. If bringing apples, please bring 2-3 large apples, 4-5 medium apples, or 6-9 small crabs. Please note on the plate if the fruit was grown in a greenhouse or high tunnel.

Upon arrival, you will be asked to use hand sanitizer. We will have some knives, but it goes faster if some of you bring your own paring knives. Tasters (you!) are requested to make thin wedges/slices from pole to pole of the apples when sampling. You will be provided a rating sheet to rate each apple and make notes. When you have finished tasting, your sheet will be recorded and given to you to take home. Keep your rating sheet so you remember what varieties you want to graft next spring! We will have pens, but it is helpful if you bring something to write with.

On Monday in Anchorage, we had our first full day of sun since mid-July. We have seen seven weeks of rain in Southcentral Alaska. August ranked as the third wettest month on record in Anchorage. Luckily, June and the beginning of July were extremely dry and sunny. That pushed our fruit development ahead of last year by almost 2 weeks. This is a lead that we have maintained despite having 50 fewer GDD/42° (Growing Degree Days) this August versus August, 2021. As of Sunday, the Growing Degree Day totals and Soil Temperatures were as follows at our East Anchorage orchard:

Aug. 28 2268 GDD/42° 1308 GDD/50° Soil 58° F/6” 57.7° F/12”
Sept. 4. 2375 GDD/42° 1308 GDD/50° Soil 58° F/6” 57.4° F/12”

At this time of year, I receive a lot of questions about apple ripening. You should know that it is normal for trees to drop some apples before they are fully ripe. In a commercial orchard, the trees are sprayed with a growth regulator to keep the apples from dropping until it is time to pick. The home grower doesn't have that tool in their toolbox. Consequently, I go out every morning and pick up the drops to sample and monitor ripeness. Most of these apples go into buckets destined later in the month (9.25.22) for pressing into juice.

To determine the right moment to pick, commercial orchards rely on a number of tests (see [Field Tools to Determine Apple Maturity](#)). The commonly grown commercial varieties have specific standards developed for each test. Once the Growing Degree Day totals indicate the approaching harvest window, the following assessments are undertaken to determine the optimum picking time. These assessments include:

Starch/iodine test to see how much starch remains.
Mechanical probe (penetrometer) to measure fruit firmness
Examination of color
Brix (most varieties: 11=fair, 12=good, 13=excellent)

For the Alaska home grower, it is a bit more challenging to determine the best harvest time. The challenge is often compounded by the fact that the apples often do not all ripen at the same time on a given tree. Sometimes there is a heating effect from nearby structures or even the ground which causes some apples to ripen slightly ahead of others. And, hope springs eternal that we can muster a bit more sweetness before picking, provided the weather cooperates.

However, quality is compromised if one waits too long to pick. Storage is better if the apple is picked slightly before fully ripe, and a picked apple does not suffer the bruising that afflicts a fallen apple. Indeed, even the texture of some apples is better before they are fully ripe. Thus, the need to sample your fruit as you start to have dropped fruit. Apples falling are a sign that the harvest train is approaching the station.

The starch/iodine test is not of much value to the Alaskan home grower. It doesn't work on a number of varieties grown in Alaska, and standards have not been developed for most of our apples. For example, in the photo below is a starch/iodine test of the following varieties (L-R): Carroll, Ft Mac/Mac, Lee 27, Prairie Magic, and Simonet. Both the Prairie Magic and Simonet (which was especially unripe) had no response to the test which should stain blue on starch.



Brix is perhaps a goal, but not an accurate indicator by itself for harvest since brix can vary depending on the weather. The past seven weeks of constant rain and clouds lowered the brix attained in our apples by around 1 point. This year, Carroll is registering 10.5-11, Ft. Mac/Mac is 10, Lee 27 is 12, and Prairie Magic is 10-11.

Carroll is best harvested when the seeds have turned half colored. This variety will soften once the seeds turn completely dark. With Carroll, the background color green will lighten as in the photo above as it achieves an optimum point for picking.

This is true as well for other apples such as Prairie Magic. In the photo above, you will notice that the background color has shifted from green to cream. This indicates that it is ripe and if not picked, it will drop soon. You can confirm this by cradling the apple in your hand. When ripe, it will move freely on its stem and detach easily.

So, to summarize, here are some of the assessments that the home grower can use to determine when to pick.

- Seed color (white unripe/black fully ripe)
- Background color on green & red apples
- Brix
- Stem detachment
- Taste for flavor/texture and mouthfeel

Remember that every apple variety is different, and may have different indicators. In addition, depending on the season, use, or storage potential, one may find it better to pick earlier or later. The main point is to be observant and make notes of what works best for a particular variety and the use it is destined for. For example, if I want Carroll for fresh eating, I will pick it slightly early. If I am simply going to use it for dried apples (a delicious variety for that purpose), then texture isn't an issue, but maximizing the fruit's sugar is. In that case, I will let them hang until fully ripe.

In other news, Nick Rothman contacted me on behalf of OLÉ! Anchorage, a non-profit volunteer-based education group for the 50 and over crowd. He is seeking someone in APFGA who would be interested in volunteering to teach a class early next year on growing fruit in Anchorage and south-central Alaska. Classes can be either in-person or via Zoom. Two four-week sessions run starting January 16 and February 13 with sessions lasting 1 hour and fifteen minutes once a week. Classes can be once a week for four weeks, eight weeks, or a customized length. If this sounds like something you are interested in, please [email Nick](#).

In regards to APFGA, I am delighted to report that this year we have over 300 APFGA members. This is in no small part due to your Board of Directors who have been actively working to order rootstock, and organize orchard tours, grafting workshops, apple pressings, and fruit tastings. [Email me](#) if you are interested in volunteering or serving on the board in the future.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the apple/fruit tasting this weekend, and hope you will bring samples of your fruit to taste!

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA