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Hello Fruit Growers!

First, a well-earned thank you to Barb Henjum and Jeff Brownlee for hosting the early apple pressing at the Brown Hen Farm last Sunday. With Mark Findlay and Sam Cason expertly manning the press all day, and the help of our members pitching in, we pressed approximately 75 buckets of apples (1,500-1,750 lbs)! Because of the cool rainy weather, the early apples were just coming ripe and hadn't gone to mush yet which really helped make the grinding go smoothly. The pressing for late apples will be on Sunday, September 26. I will send a notice and sign-up instructions next week.

Our next event will hopefully be an apple tasting either Saturday or Sunday at 2 PM on September 18 or 19 in our yard in East Anchorage. I will send an email next Thursday (September 16) with details, and to let you know which day it will be, provided the weather cooperates. The apple tasting is probably the most important event for our newer members who are trying to decide what varieties to grow.

While we are on the subject of apples, the Alaska mid-season apples are starting to drop and are moving towards ripeness probably next week. Generally the early drops are not ripe. You will know this by taste, and the fact that the seeds are pure white. The seeds will turn black when fully ripe.

I wash these early drops and set them aside to be later pressed into juice. I regularly sample drops to monitor the ripening progress. Some varieties, like Carroll, I like to harvest when the seeds are half colored. I like the apple's texture and flavor at that point. If I let them hang until fully ripe the apple softens a bit. Wednesday, I had my first drop of Lee 27. Although the seeds were white, it was already a great apple to eat. So, sample your drops and see what you like and keep an eye on how things are ripening.

It won't be long before you start to harvest the Alaska mid and late season apples. If you want to keep them crisp longer for fresh eating, move them into refrigeration right after picking. The only exception to that would be Honeycrisp (unlikely outside this year) and Lee 27. To prevent a chilling injury called "soft-scald," those apples should be conditioned at 50 degrees for one week, before moving them into refrigeration.

Like many of you, I have been busy bringing in the harvest. Tuesday, I did a second picking of Northblue and Chippewa blueberries (7.5 lbs), and then picked the Carmine Jewel cherries. I had been going out and picking any split cherries after every rain, and there has been a lot of rain! In the end, half of the Carmine Jewel cherries had split, but those that made it to the end were dark and beautiful with an average brix of 11.5. Without much sun and cool temperatures the past 4 weeks, this was about as good as it was going to get.

The Romeo and Juliet cherries do not split as much and are a bit more crack resistant. However, they do crack and I recommend that you try to keep the bushes picked of cracked and moldy fruit if you want to ripen them more. I have a bush of Romeo in a warm spot in my orchard that I picked on September 1 (brix 14). I also have Juliet (Top photo) and Romeo grafted to a Prunus Maackii (Amur Chokecherry) that is almost ready, and a Juliet bush in a cold part of the yard that is loaded but needs a bit more time. The Juliet bush has set too much fruit and consequently the fruit are all under 1 inch, whereas the grafted Juliet are large and generally 1 inch or more.

For crack resistance in tart cherries, I am happiest with the Evans (Bali) cherry. Rarely, do I see cracked cherries with that variety. And with a cool summer like we have just had, I don't have to be concerned about rain forcing me to pick earlier than I want. (I like to wait until the stems turn reddish-gold) The downside is that the Evans (zone 3) is not as hardy as Romeo and Juliet (Zone 2). For those who wonder about the mechanisms involved concerning [why cherries split](#), click the link for an in-depth explanation. When you have finished the article, you should be able to identify the cause of the split shown in the Juliet cherry above.

Many of our members are growing plums or are interested in plums. I purchased a rooted sucker from an unknown seedling plum that Dave Rankin has been propagating over the past 45 years. It has become somewhat wide-spread and is simply known as "Dave's Plum." This was my path down the rabbit-hole of plum knowledge or what may be loosely called my professional development(?). And trust me, plums are a bit more complicated than apples. In Alaska we basically deal with three classifications of plums: European plums (Prunus Domestica), the wild American and Canadian Plums (Prunus Americana and Nigra), and Japanese and Hybrid plums (Prunus Salicina and P. Salicina x Nigra or Americana).

Understanding plum grafting compatibility and pollination has been a bit of a steep learning curve. The way I discovered that "Dave's Plum" was not a European plum was that all six of my European plum grafts this spring were rejected (!). One of the varieties that I tried to graft was Northern Blue. (photo below)



I had purchased the scion wood from APFGA co-founder Bob Purvis. Bob is very knowledgeable about all things fruit. He knows his stuff about plums and heads up the apricot interest group for the North American Fruit Explorers (NAFEX). Bob also thought Northern Blue might be a good candidate for growing in Alaska and even sent me a box of plums to try in August. Luckily, I remembered to take a photo before I ate them all! Even though the plums had been picked early for shipping, the flavor was quite good with some overtones reminiscent of concord grape. Bob was kind enough to write an article about the plum variety for our club. Click on the link to read [Northern Blue: The "Beginner's Plum"](#) by Bob Purvis.

We had a bumper crop (8 lbs) of Swedish Black currants from our one plant. They had a decent sugar level with a Brix of 13. I picked them on August 31, and put them into the freezer. Black currants are a very versatile fruit. Everyone knows that they make amazing preserves and juice, and I even enjoy them fresh. What many people don't realize is that they are a wonderful substitute fruit for wine makers who don't have access to grapes.

I have been experimenting with fermentation using the natural yeasts on the fruit. I first tried this after noticing one year that my bucket of bad and moldy cherries (which I had put a lid on and forgot about) had somehow spontaneously juiced and fermented! The wine I have done with the natural yeasts were slow to complete fermentation, but the result was a more rounded flavor without the sharp edge that wine yeast can impart on fruit wines.

Our black currants had a nice bloom on their skins and looked like good candidates to experiment with. My plan was to use this year's frozen currants along with those from last year, two quarts of frozen and pitted Carmine Jewel early splits, and 2 gallons of Golden Uralian apple juice pressed this past weekend. Fruit that has been frozen is easier to break down in preparation for the primary fermentation. I normally use a hydrometer to set the starting specific gravity of the must, but this time I used my [brix refractometer](#) which made it easy to take quick and frequent samples as I balanced the sugar content.

The fermentation was successfully in full swing after 36 hours. I have a packet of Red Star's Cotes des Blanc yeast in the refrigerator should the fermentation get stuck. Wild yeasts don't tolerate alcohol as well as their select commercial cousins and can stop fermenting after achieving only 3-4% alcohol. If the fermentation gets stuck, I will add yeast energizer and the commercial yeast to finish the fermentation. Using natural yeast isn't foolproof, but it can lead to interesting results since every yeast imparts different flavors and aromas.

If you want to dive into the world of making wine, cordials or hard cider with your fruit, I recommend a visit to [Arctic Brewing Supply](#). There, you can find all of the accoutrements needed to make and bottle the elixirs made with your excess fruit.

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA