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Hello Fruit Growers!

I don't know about you, but I am ready to put my snow boots away for a while! Thanks to being on a Southwest facing hill, the snow was mostly gone in our orchard on April 28 (photo above). The speedy snowmelt is an indication of the increased heat and solar gain granted by a slope facing the sun in high latitudes. Snow still lingers on the flat and shaded parts of the yard which is not unusual at this time of year, despite my impatience.

As the snow recedes, reports of vole damage have been coming in. If you had vole damage this year, then please consider taking steps to reduce habitat and populations this summer. An orchard mulched with woodchips gives very little habitat for them to hide in. Consider trapping or baiting to reduce their numbers. One year, the population got out of hand at our place to the point that they were posing for pictures! I personally think they are kind of cute, but I was compelled to take action after they girdled a prized tree and damaged a number of others.

The first of April is when we start the clock on growing degree day accumulation. Growing Degree Days (GDD) are measurements of heat units which allow the tracking of plant growth, pest emergence, fruit ripening, etc. I have a temperature logger and software to compute GDDs in our orchard which reflects our particular micro-climate. The loggers are not horribly expensive and if you are interested in setting up your own station for comparison, please see my presentation [From Bud to Fruit](#) for more information.

The standard base temperature for GDDs used to track fruit tree development is 42°F. I compute the GDDs using a single sine method which approximates the computational method used by many university extension services. This allows me to compare data, and to anticipate events that happen in other places of the country or Canada. For example, full bloom for early apples has already happened in Michigan when they achieved 430 GDD/42° back in mid-April. Last year, we hit that point of development May 29.

Ground temperature in our orchard at 6" never went below 32.6°F this winter. Thanks to the slope and early snow melt, the temperature is already up to 39° F at 6" depth. Not only has this been a record season for snow (7<sup>th</sup> snowiest on record), but it has also been an unusually cold month of April. Below is our GDD accumulation for the month compared with the previous two years.

April 2021: 135 GDD/42°

April 2022: 90 GDD/42°

April 2023: 40 GDD/42°

The Grafting Workshop on April 15 went very well. Kudos to board member Doug Damberg for an excellent job organizing the workshop. Attendance was robust, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves while learning a bit about grafting. A big thank you to everyone who submitted scion! The large collection of scion wood donated by Fire Apple Orchard complete with great tags and information was particularly noteworthy. And also, a hearty thank you to all of the volunteers that helped at the workshop and the day before, packaging up everyone's rootstock order.

The only snafu this year concerned the pear rootstock. Our invoice showed *Pyrus ussuriensis* (Harbin), but after distribution, one member found a nursery tag on one of their pear rootstock with the label Pear Province BA29C, which is hardy to only Zone 5. That could mean that a wrong tag was used, one of the 3 bundles of 50 was the wrong rootstock, or even that the entire collection of pear was not what we ordered. Unfortunately, we won't know for sure until June 2024, when we see whether or not they survived the winter. We apologize for the uncertainty of this situation and have made a note to be more diligent next year in confirming our orders when they arrive before opening the bundles. Please [email me](#) if you found a tag on your pear rootstock and let me know what it says.

If you have been with APFGA for a couple of years, you probably have the results of some earlier grafting workshops growing in your yard. The first few years after grafting a rootstock involves training the young tree to be the shape and form that you want in the future. We have spent a fair amount of time on apples and you can find some resources on training young apple trees on the [APFGA website](#). I personally like the book [Training and Pruning Apple Trees](#) by C.G. Forshey recommended to me by fellow member Terry Thisius. It does an excellent job explaining the principles for training free standing apple trees.

In regards to training young cherry trees, a good guide to traditional open center and modified central leader forms is [Training and Pruning Tart Cherries](#) published by Utah State University Extension. If you really want to get into the weeds, the Pacific Northwest Extension publication [Cherry Training Systems](#) is an authoritative guide to modern cherry systems. Although the focus is on sweet cherries, the training systems could be applied to tart cherries as well.



Cherries appear to have met their chill hour requirement and are now showing some bud development as seen in the photo above of Evans (Bali) tart cherry.

If you mulched your strawberries, remove the mulch once the snow clears. We have our strawberries in raised beds with hoops for low tunnel growing. If you grow hardy June bearers, mulching is generally not necessary, provided we have snow cover before any severe cold. We grow an early June bearer (Annapolis or A.C. Wendy) combined with a midseason June bearer (Cavendish) to stretch out the strawberry season. By covering the hoops over the early variety now, they will come into production sooner to minimize the overlap between the early and midseason strawberries. Low tunnels have many advantages including bird exclusion, and rain proofing the crop. Although in Southcentral we grow June bearers as perennials without issue, higher latitudes (interior) may be better off planting day neutral strawberries as annuals. If this speaks your interest, please see [Untangling the Mysteries of Growing Strawberries in Alaska](#) by Heidi Rader.

Currants and gooseberries will require pruning in May. See the publication [Growing Currants and Gooseberries in the Home Garden](#) for more information on selecting, growing and pruning these plants. This guide also has recommendations on cultivars with mildew resistance since that has been an issue for some members.

In regards to black currants, there has been a bit of discussion about black currant midge in Alaska. The insects lay their eggs on the emerging leaf shoots. The larvae feed on the leaves damaging the plant's new growth. Fred Deiser recently sent me a study ([Assessment of Infestation of Blackcurrant Genotypes by the Blackcurrant leaf midge in Poland](#)) examining whether certain cultivars were more resistant to the insect. Many of the "Ben" series show resistance. Of the those listed in the study available in the US, it appears that Ben Conan may be a good choice for growers in Alaska. Fred reports that there is limited availability of Ben Conan at St. Lawrence Nursery in New York, but you need to call and talk to Alisa.

Mid-May is when we can begin grafting on existing trees. We call this top-working, and we will hold two workshops on the topic. The first will be on Saturday, May 6 at 10:00 am at Mid-Valley Greenhouse in Wasilla. Master grower Dan Elliot will lead that workshop and will demonstrate by top-working some nursery stock. Please note that the workshop will be held on the production side of the greenhouse property at [5331 E Blue Lupine](#).

The following week, on Saturday, May 13, at 1:00 pm, I will lead a workshop on top-working at [Airport Heights Elementary](#), in Anchorage. We will meet in front of the school (Alder Drive) at the trees between the drop-off drive and road. The focus of the demonstration will be top-working *Prunus Maackii* (Amur chokecherry) with tart cherries. The school is just down the block from Fire Island Bakery if you need lunch or a treat.

Boyer's Orchard and Greenhouse, a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational orchard in S. Anchorage, is starting to plan workshops for the season: dormant pruning, grafting, tree planting, and summer pruning workshops. Yael Hickok is looking for experienced tree people to lead or support the workshops. She is also looking for "fruit-heads" (et tu?) to sell or donate fruit trees and plants. These can be donated to sell as a fundraiser, or to plant in the orchard where they have done a lot of clearing. The orchard also welcomes people to sell as vendors at their June 3 Blossom Festival, and donate a portion to the orchard. Please email Boyer's Orchard at [info@alaskaorchard.org](mailto:info@alaskaorchard.org) or call 907-529-1088 if you want to help, volunteer or participate.

Mark Oathout, owner of Mid-Valley Greenhouse is interested in purchasing any extra grafted fruit trees from members. Often, members graft more trees than they need in case one dies. If you end up with extra trees that need a home, email Mark for more information.

Board member Ilona Farr has a property in Butte that the club has visited many times as part of our summer orchard tours. Those who have been to the property have seen the large greenhouse. Well, the greenhouse like many high tunnels, collapsed this winter due to snow load. Ilona has scheduled a work party May 6 and 13 from 2-6 pm at her place in Butte at [3700 South Bodenbergl Loop](#) to clean up the collapsed greenhouse and prune the damaged trees. She would appreciate any volunteer helpers! [Email Ilona](#) if you have any questions or are willing to lend a hand.

And finally, on behalf of APFGA, I wish to extend our deepest condolences to Randy and Sonja Arduser (Clark Orchard) for the sudden loss of their son Alex, a recently retired Alaska Wildlife Trooper. Our thoughts and hearts go out to them and their family in this moment of sorrow.

All the best,

Mark Wolbers  
President, APFGA