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Happy New Year Fruit Growers!

It feels good to be over the solstice hump. It is a noticeable psychological boost to know that the days are getting longer again. It makes the next growing season feel more like a reality instead of just a theoretical possibility.

In Southcentral Alaska, we have set a new snow record for the months of December and January. I have gone out multiple times already with snowshoes and my garden hoe to stomp down the snow around our nursery plants and to collapse the snow around our tree’s rodent screens. The photo above is of a young pear (Summcrsrp on P. ussuriensis) before I knocked the snow down around its 2 foot high screen. The goal is to keep the snow collapsed at the boundary layer between the snow and the ground and to keep the snow from topping our screens or tree guards. This will hopefully keep the voles from tunneling and finding our trees or using the snow to get over the tree guards. Voles are good climbers, but we don’t want to make it easy for them!

APFGA always has a wonderful free [scion wood](#) exchange at our April grafting workshop. Your Board of Directors work to ensure that five main apple cultivars (Parkland, Norland, Trailman, Prairie Magic and Carroll) are always available for grafting. Members contribute the numerous other varieties and cultivars of apple, cherry, pear, plum, and apricot. However, if you are looking for a specific cultivar, and do not know a grower who can provide you with scion wood or don’t want to take the chance that it might not be available at the grafting workshop, then you should consider ordering it this month.

There are numerous options for ordering scion wood. Those that I have used have included Fedco, Cummins Nursery, and Purvis Nursery and Orchard. Bob Purvis is a founding member of APFGA and understands Alaska growing conditions. The website for [Purvis Nursery and Orchard](#) contains good information on the varieties and cultivars offered, and Bob is patiently willing to answer any questions. [Fedco Trees](#) is located in Maine and offers cold hardy plant material. The apple scion collection benefits from the input of Fedco Trees founder and pomologist John Bunker. Cultivars that might be successful in our East Anchorage orchard are listed in the Fedco catalogue as Early, Mid or possibly Late Summer. [Cummins Nursery](#) is in New York and is run by Steve Cummins, the son of Dr. Jim Cummins who was the force behind the development of the Geneva series of apple rootstocks, one of which (G. 890) we have ordered for our members this year. When looking at their list of varieties and cultivars of scion wood, we have found that a New York ripening date before September 1, was generally compatible with our East Anchorage season length. Of course, you should adjust these recommendations based upon your own micro-climate.

In the December newsletter, I had included information on five new cultivars of black currants and provided an order form. Based on member response, the Board of Directors decided to look into ordering the varieties Blackcomb, Nicola, Tahsis, and Whistler. Our rootstock manager (Gary Masog) contacted the nursery and placed an order for all five varieties (added Stikine) after seeing that we qualified for a sizable discount by doing so. If you still want to reserve plants from this order, we have a few that are as yet unspoken for. Just [email me](#) with your black currant request and I will put you on the list.

The erratic weather that is being generated due to global warming is making tree fruit growing increasingly challenging. One way to mitigate risk, provided you have the land, is to grow inside high tunnels or greenhouses. They provide more Growing Degree Days (GDDs) to get fruit ripe, and allow you to control for variables such as rain and frost. With the use of dwarfing rootstock and high-density growing techniques, high tunnels can be an effective way to grow predictable harvests of tree fruit. If this is something of interest to you, you might want to check out the University of Minnesota [New guide + Webinar series: Choosing a high tunnel for your farm](#).

In early December, I attended the Great Lakes Fruit and Vegetable Expo (GLExpo) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Since I have no formal schooling in horticulture or agriculture, conferences like GLExpo are a great opportunity to engage in professional development and networking. You can [view my notes](#) from the conference by clicking the link.

Reviewing my conference notes, I noticed that I failed to write about the annual Michigan fresh apple cider contest at the conference. I got distracted (Squirrel!) talking to the MSU extension agent supervising the tastings. In sampling the top 4 ciders from the competition, I was using wine language to describe what I was tasting, only to find out that I was talking to MSU’s grape and wine extension expert. (That, of course, led down another one of my favorite rabbit-holes to a discussion about wine and wine grapes.) Having grown up in Michigan, I commented that the cider did not taste like the juice of my youth, and that our less than perfect Alaska apples actually made for a juice with more depth of flavor. This is probably because Michigan’s apple harvest is now dominated with dessert apples like Honeycrisp, Gala, and Fuji that did not exist 40 years ago.

If you attended the first program of APFGA’s Winter Speaker Series, you heard our speaker David Takush make similar observations about our Alaska apples. I had sent him the juice analysis that Steve and Sarah Masterman compiled and shared with the club a few years ago. I suspect that many of the qualities that would make Alaska apples desirable for hard cider, also contribute in a beneficial way to the taste profiles of our fresh juice. So, take heart. We might not be able to grow a gigantic Honeycrisp apple, but the apples we do grow make some darn good juice. If you missed Dave’s presentation on [Apples and Cider Making](#), both the video and juice analysis is posted on the APFGA website under the “Research” tab, Meeting Slides and Video.

On Thursday, January 11, 2024, our second presenter for the Winter Speaker Series will be our own Ilona Farr who will present on her experience growing apricots in Alaska. The club has toured her orchard in Butte a number of times, and she has been active in the club for many years, including serving on the Board of Directors. Click the following Zoom link at 7:00 pm to watch her presentation [Growing Apricots](#). If needed, here is also the full [Zoom invitation](#).

On December 20, the Board met with our newly elected Directors (Michael Burke, Doug Damberg, Chris Hellman, and Sabrina Shaw) to elect officers. The officers elected for this year are myself (President), Michael Burke (Vice President), Gary Masog (Treasurer), and Doug Damberg (Secretary). The Board of Directors will meet this month on Wednesday, January 17, 2024 at 7:00 pm. Members are always welcome to sit in on the meetings. What follows are the links to join the January [Board Meeting](#), the [Agenda](#), and [Minutes](#).

Finally, with the start of the new year, a reminder to [renew your membership](#) or to consider signing up for a lifetime membership.

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA

