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Hello Fruit Growers!

February brought some warm Chinook winds to Southcentral and interior Alaska. Here in Anchorage, there were even a few days in the low 40s. I often get asked if this will be damaging to our trees. Luckily, in this part of Alaska, we had an early onset of winter with steady cold temperatures. Consequently, our trees have not met their [chill hour requirement](#). This means that even though the temperatures are above freezing, the trees remain in endo-dormancy and do not wake up. What does happen when temperatures exceed 32° F. is that our trees lose their enhanced hardiness which is gained (and can be regained) with daily temperatures below 32° F. However, unless there is a sudden onset of very severe cold, our tree’s base hardiness should be adequate to keep them protected from winter injury.

The month of March is the recommended time for dormant pruning in Alaska. Although, if the deep snow persists, it may not be until the end of the month or even early April before we can get into our orchards sans snowshoes. Regardless, to get those pruning skills ready, we will have our annual pruning workshop in the comfort of the [Boyer’s Greenhouse](#) on Saturday, March 16, 2024, at 1:00 pm. After a bit of brief instruction, you will join some of our experienced members who will provide guidance and instruction as we prune the trees in the greenhouse. Bring gloves and your pruning shears and loppers! If you are just getting started growing fruit trees, Costco will have an inexpensive Fiskar Pruner and Lopper Set on sale for \$19.99 beginning March 5.

March is also the time to collect [scion wood](#). Scion wood is best collected while it is fully dormant. I like to harvest one tree (cultivar) at a time and then bag it up and immediately label the zip-lock bag so I don’t accidentally mix up the scion wood. Nothing is more annoying than finding out 3 or more years later that the cultivar you thought you had grafted was not what was growing in your yard!

Most everyone in the club participates in the free scion wood exchange at the annual grafting workshop scheduled for Saturday, April13, 2024 at [Begich Middle School](#). There you will be able to select scion wood, pick up and purchase rootstock, and receive instruction on grafting. We would ask that you only bring known cultivars of scion wood (no mystery trees!) and that you not bring cultivars still protected by patent. This would include any cultivars released within the past 20 years such as KinderKrisp (2015), and Prairie Sensation (2008). In addition to apple, it is really helpful if people harvest and bring cherry, plum, pear and apricot scion wood as well. With the pear rootstock Pyrus Ussuriensis (Harbin) we recommend grafting an inter-stem of Summercrisp. Consequently, that scion wood is always needed for the grafting workshop.

For the grafting workshop on April 13, we plan to set up at 11:00 am, have members bring scion wood at 11:30 am, and then fully open the workshop to members at noon. The event is open to the general public starting at 1:00 pm. We will be done and out of the building at 3:00 pm. Board Member Doug Damberg is again organizing the grafting workshop and is putting out the call for volunteers to help. Some of the many tasks include helping with set-up, admission, grafting instruction, scion wood, rootstock distribution, and clean-up. If you are willing to help, please [email Doug](#) and include what tasks you are interested in helping with and what hours you are available.

Member Michal Stryszak was kind enough to forward to me the information for applying to the [Microgrants for Food Security Program](#). Awards up to \$3500 are available to individuals, non-profits, and other organizations wanting to increase the quantity and quality of locally grown food (including subsistence) for food insecure individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities.

The Anchorage Soil and Water Conservation District is looking to hire a [full-time invasive species technician](#) for the summer. What a great summer job opportunity! Perfect for a college student, interested in doing work related to horticulture/agriculture. If interested, I encourage folks to apply even if it doesn’t seem like you meet all of the qualifications.

Earlier in February, I attended the annual conference of the International Fruit Tree Association (IFTA) that was held this year in Yakima, Washington. It was four packed days of sessions and orchard tours where I witnessed how some of the best fruit growers in the country grow fruit. If you are interested, I have attached my notes from the [first two days of the conference](#). My notes from the last two days of the conference will be attached in next month’s newsletter.

I often get asked why I think it is important to learn the best practices for fruit growing from those outside of Alaska. Afterall, how can what they do have any application to our unique growing environment? The trick I think, is to work to understand the principals being applied and then see how they might be adapted for Alaska. For example, WSU’s Dr. Matt Whiting explained at the IFTA conference how light interception is foundational to fruit growing. The photo at the top shows apples being grown on a high-density North-South Y trellis. This architecture efficiently captures the sun and provides even ripening of the fruit. This works great in Washington, but what orientation and trellis design best captures the lower angle light of the Alaska sun? This thought process is prompting me to experiment with a fruiting wall architecture facing South-Southwest in my orchard this summer.

In addition, there is also benefit in considering light interception for traditional free-standing seedling trees. In Alaska, we adopted principals for training and pruning from locations with over-head sun. How might our tree training and pruning practices be modified to accommodate the low-angle end-of-August sun of Alaska? If we want the fruit on the North side of the tree to intercept light, then we need to prune or train in a way that doesn’t shade out that side of the tree. Perhaps much greater canopy porosity is needed? Good pruning in Alaska may require a limb structure even more open than the traditional pruning adage “enough space to throw a cat through.”

The principals of growing a modern high-density orchard may be new to Alaska. But the possibilities for members to be able to grow more and better fruit with less labor is very enticing. This is why we are bringing in our first shipment of Geneva 890 (G.890) clonal rootstocks, and in my own orchard, I am trialing dwarfing rootstocks and experimenting with vertical planar architectures. Click the link to learn more about [A High Density Apple Production System for the Home Garden](#). If intrigued, [email me](#) for spacing information using the G.890 rootstock. For more on light interception see [Light Concepts for Apple Orchards by Anna Wallis](#).

For those ordering the G.890 rootstock this spring, keep in mind that this is a very flexible rootstock. It can be used in a high-density system, but it also is perfect as a free-standing tree. The advantage of using the clonal rootstock is that you will have fruit sooner, and you will not have to prune as much when the tree matures.

With that in mind, join us on [Zoom on Thursday, March 14 at 7:00 pm](#) when our last speaker of the APFGA Winter Speaker Series will be Dr. Gennaro Fazio. Since 2001, Dr. Fazio has been a plant breeder and research geneticist with the USDA-ARS Plant Genetic Resources Unit, and an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Horticultural Sciences Dept. at Cornell University in Geneva NY. He will discuss planting and training Geneva rootstock for high density and free-standing trees, as well as when to begin cropping the trees with a focus on G. 890. He will discuss other cold hardy Geneva rootstocks suitable for use as freestanding trees or in high density plantings for you-pick or high tunnel orchards. If needed, here is the [full Zoom invitation](#).

The APFGA Board of Directors will meet on [Zoom at 7:00 pm on Wednesday, March 20, 2024](#). Click the links for the proposed [agenda](#), past minutes, and [full zoom invitation](#). Members are always welcome to sit in on the meetings. One of the items we have been mulling over concerns the APFGA mission statement. In our bylaws it states: “The purpose of the Alaska Pioneer Fruit Growers Association is to share in and benefit from the personal experience of successful fruit growing in Alaska and to help educate any person(s) interested in the fruit growing experience. The Association is organized for charitable, educational, and scientific purposes.”

The board understands how APFGA is meeting the educational and scientific purposes of our charter, but we are less confident about the charitable aspect of our organization. What might we be doing in the charitable realm? I suggested possibly pairing with Habitat for Humanity in donating a fruit tree or two along with a membership to APFGA for new homeowners. In the end, it was suggested that we ask you, the membership, for suggestions concerning charitable fruit growing activities that you might be willing to engage in. If you have some ideas, please email our Vice President, [Michael Burke](#).

All the best,

Mark Wolbers  
President, APFGA

