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Hello Fruit Growers!

It has been another cool month, but soon we will be entering apple and cherry bloom! I saw our first bumblebee on May 14 on an early flowering haskap (Svetlana) followed by some honeybees three days later when it had warmed a bit. Some of my rootstock from the grafting workshop I apparently grafted with two-year old scion wood because they produced beautiful flowers (picture above 5.19.24) that were enjoyed by the foraging bees before being removed.

The yellow Jacket queens have been busy pollinating the currants and gooseberries, while the bumble bees handle the haskaps. Managing the yellow jacket population can be challenging. On one hand, they provide an important pollination function early in the season, but once the broods hatch and the flowers are done, it is time to put out the traps. Failure to do so can lead to damaged fruit as they will feed on cherries, blueberries, haskaps and gooseberries.

With consistent cloud cover courtesy of a jet stream guiding repeated low-pressure systems into the Gulf of Alaska, daily high temperatures in Southcentral Alaska have been consistently 10-15° F cooler than in Fairbanks. This has retarded plant development. (see photos below of fruit development as of 5.31.24)



This has been the coldest May of the past four years with only 241 GDDs/42° (Growing Degree Days) for the month. This is half of what we would normally expect for May. Past experience would suggest that this early deficit in development will be compounded as the summer continues unless there is a change in the usual rain pattern in the second half of the summer.

Despite the lack of sun, the plants are soldiering on. One has to admire the plants that are adapted to handling the worse weather that Alaska can deliver.

Ground temperature in our East Anchorage orchard is 50° F at 6 inches. Below is our year-to-date GDD accumulation compared with the previous three years.

2021: 450 GDD/42°
2022: 500 GDD/42°
2023: 318 GDD/42°
2024: 333 GDD/42°

With apple bloom commencing, it is important to be thoughtful about crop load management. If your trees did not bloom last year, then this year they may have a bounty of flowers. Hopefully, you dormant pruned to remove some of the flowers, and maybe even thinned out some fruit spurs. Remember, only about 10% of the flowers on an apple tree with a normal bloom are needed for a full crop. Within each flower bud are a cluster of 5-6 flowers that can each become pollinated and set fruit. So, removing some flowers once they emerge can save some fruit thinning work later.

The first flower to open is called the king blossom. Generally, the king blossom will be the largest fruitlet. The rest of the fruitlets of a cluster should be thinned so that the remaining apple can grow large. (This doesn't apply to crab apples which will remain small regardless.) In addition, the total number of potential apples needs to be controlled so the tree is not overcropped which can lead to biennialism where the tree bears heavily one year and then takes a year off. It looks like this season has the potential to be cool and cloudy. Consequently, the number of apples that the tree can support AND have an adequate return bloom may be less than normal. The number of apples can be reduced by spacing out the apples on a limb (9" apart), or by counting the total number of apples and estimating how many apples the tree can support. In any case, a number of flower clusters/fruitlets will be removed completely.

On developing trees, the question of fruit load is somewhat more complex. Are you willing to sacrifice tree growth for fruit? Often it is better to forgo the first or even second potential crop until the tree has gained some size. When the tree is young, you should head back branches to increase branch strength so when the time comes to hang an apple or two, the branch is strong enough to handle it. Nothing is sadder than seeing a limb broken off because of excessive fruit load.

The earlier that you thin, the better. Studies have shown that the fastest growth happens early after pollination. Competition from the other apple fruitlets caused by waiting to thin reduces the initial growth rate which locks in a smaller eventual size for the developing apple. Click the link for a deeper dive into the [Relative Growth Rate](#) concept.

When bloom has finished and you have completed your thinning, then it is the time to top apple trees that are getting too tall. By doing this after bloom, you mitigate the rush of growth that would have occurred had you topped the tree during dormant pruning. You can also reduce regrowth by topping just above a non-vigorous lateral. Your next task is to move any upright vigorous branches into more horizontal positions. When the tips of the branches point upward, that signals for fast vegetative growth. Training them to a more horizontal plane changes the hormones, reduces vigor, and helps to set future fruit buds.



A big "Thank You" to Gennaro Fazio and Todd Holleran for sending us 800 various Geneva rootstocks for trial by our growers. Doug Damberg, Gary Masog, and Mark Findlay helped to package up the rootstock and get it ready for pickup by our members (photo above). We look forward to hearing the reports on how the rootstock performs over the next couple of years.

In other news, member George Stadnick is looking for an apricot tree. If anyone has a tree for sale, please email [George](#). Also our order of new black currant releases is expected to arrive on June 6. Those of you who ordered plants will be notified by email when they arrive. Pickup will be at my house. Along with payment, you will need to sign a non-propagation agreement when you collect your plants.

I also wanted to pass along information about the North American Virtual Orchard Meetup Series coming in June. These virtual meetings will be held weekly every Thursday from June 6 to June 27, at 3:00 PM over zoom. The topic this year is water! Since 2021, the Summer Virtual Meetup Program has brought together growers, researchers, extension, and government to have a conversation about important tree fruit topics. Connecting industry leaders across North America, over 20 experts are involved in these 90-minute online forums, interacting with more than 1,000 participants.

This meetup series will focus on "Water Wisdom: Navigating Tree Fruit Production Through Drought and Deluge". Over the past decade, growers have experienced unpredictable rainfall, water availability challenges, droughts and deluges. Explore methods for adapting to these challenges and discuss alternatives for efficient irrigation practices, including advances in irrigation technologies that help growers produce high quality fruit. If this sounds of interest to you, click the link for [more information](#).

Finally, on Wednesday, June 19 at 7:00 pm, we will have a Board of Directors meeting. Members are always welcome to attend board meetings. Simply click the link at the date and time to join the [Zoom meeting](#). Here are links to the proposed [agenda](#), and the past [minutes](#).

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA

