



Jenny Appleseed

Within a year or two after moving to Haddam, I planted several apple trees. As with everything else in the garden, I envisioned grand, trouble-free results: starkly architectural naked branches through the winters; swoon-worthy froths of pale pink apple blossoms in spring; lush foliage all summer; and a bounty of crisp red apples each fall. Also as with everything else, it hasn't turned out quite that way.

John Chapman, known to history as Johnny Appleseed, was a real person, but the legend bears little resemblance to his life story. True, he traveled several Midwestern states in the early nineteenth century distributing seeds, but the popular image of a pioneer striding through fields and forests, broadcasting seeds, couldn't be less accurate. In fact, Chapman purchased land and started nurseries in at least three states--over 1200 acres in all—then created partnerships with neighboring locals. They would care for the trees, sell the seeds and seedlings, and give him a share of the proceeds. It was, essentially, an early form of franchise, and he was a successful if eccentric businessman.

Why seeds instead of trees? Apples will not come true from seeds, any more than you are identical to your parents. The only way to get a new Granny Smith or Macintosh tree is to graft a piece of the parent tree onto rootstock. Nursery growers choose the best rootstock according to specific objectives: cold hardiness, disease resistance, tree size. But Johnny Appleseed had religious objections to grafting. He believed apples should grow just as they came from God, so he stuck with seeds. An occasional tree might produce excellent fruit for baking or eating fresh, and other growers might then give it a name and propagate it, but the bulk of the harvest would become cider.

My grafted trees came with labels. As instructed in my Master Gardener classes, I drew diagrams and listed the varieties in my garden notebook. Unfortunately, I later left the notebook out in the rain, so while I can remember a few of the varieties, I don't know which is which. Only the two in the front courtyard have finally matured enough to produce fruit. Unsurprisingly, other than being round-ish, my apples bear little resemblance to the shiny perfect orbs found in grocery stores. Mine are smaller, more irregular, set among leaves with mottled orange spots.

The culprits are known, but not easily controlled, at least if one is committed to organic-only treatments:

Cedar apple rust. Bright orange galls grow on cedars, and each releases thousands of spores to infect apples. The most effective prevention is to cut down every cedar within 500 feet—or, better, two miles. I'm sure my neighbors won't mind me doing some chainsaw landscaping. Fungicidal treatments must be carefully timed in the spring, up until three weeks after bloom. Neem is the best-known organic fungicide. I didn't get around to it this spring, and my harvest is paying the price. I've already marked my calendar for next April.

To an extent, you can sidestep the cedar rust problem by choosing disease-resistant varieties. I'm fairly sure there's a 'Freedom' apple somewhere in my tiny orchard. But I chose most of the trees for other qualities: good for baking, good to eat right off the tree, best keeper (chosen when I was still optimistic that I'd have impressive harvests). And the sentimental choice, my father's favorite, Macoun. They can't be grown down south and don't travel well, so he couldn't get them in Florida. I used to ship a box every fall.

Nutrition. Lots of organic compost used to be adequate, but an infestation of jumping worms has created a vicious circle. The worms strip the soil of nutrients, and the more compost I add, the more the worms multiply. Every time I dig, I turn up at least one big, fat, repulsive squirmer. I stomp them thoroughly, or drop them into a bucket with bleach, but I might as well be trying to remove grains of sand from the beach. The trees look stressed and the apples are puny. I don't like chemical fertilizers, and they tend to be heavy on nitrogen, which promotes leaves but not fruit, but I am at a loss to think of an alternative.

Critters. I planned to grow apples for myself. Instead I'm feeding squirrels, birds, and deer. Yes, that photo was taken in my courtyard, just a few days ago. I don't mind sharing a few, but I do hope I can salvage enough for a Thanksgiving pie.

I'll do a heavy pruning this winter—always an exercise fraught with anxiety, “What if I do it wrong?”—and start fresh next spring.