

APPLES

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *MALUS SPP.*



SPECIES OVERVIEW

Apple trees are members of the Rosaceae family, along with many other common fruit-bearing trees, such as plums and pears. The modern apple, *Malus domestica*, has a long and diverse history and can be traced back to origins in the mountains of the region known today as Kazakhstan, where a similar species of apple, *Malus sieversii*, still grows wild.

For as long as people have been trading across Eurasia, apples have been harvested and grown by people. Apple trees were also one of the first crop species brought to North America during early colonization. In Alberta, our hardy apple species also include genetics from a crab apple tree native to Russia (known as *Malus baccata*) and some crab apple species from North America.



CULTURAL VALUE

Today, apple trees are grown in every part of the world where the climate can support tree crops (known as orchards). In Alberta, the apple tree has a story that is synonymous with pioneering and building resilience in the province's harsh climate. The early apple trees were often seeds or varieties brought directly from the old world. Some apple trees came by way of established orchards from older parts of Canada, such as those found in Ontario and Quebec. Many of these Eastern orchards perished in the harsh prairie winters, however, some still live on today, being stewarded by the cultures that bore them. Many older homesteads or multi-generational farms across Canada still have crabapple seedlings of Russian or Ukrainian descent.

Before modern conveniences, fruit could not be shipped worldwide at all times of the year. This meant that people in Alberta had to grow the foods they needed for their families and communities.

When you visit old homesteads in Alberta, almost every single one has a crabapple tree or two, and many of them have a specific variety of Russian origin known as dolgo. Dolgo was a variety of crabapple tree that was planted not only for its production of food and shelter, but also for its beauty. This species is very high in pectin, which was important for homesteaders to be able to make preserves, which supplemented their winter diet.

As early as 1905, Alberta saw the planting of several commercial apple orchards, with historical records mentioning many notable orchards such as ones located in Edmonton (Cloverbar), Vermillion, Kitscoty, and Wetaskiwin. These notable orchards primarily consisted of crabapple genetics.



In the modern era, the University of Saskatchewan has a hardy apple breeding program and has released many of the commonly available varieties, such as Prairie Magic and SK Prairie Sun. Many of the 3rd and 4th generational varieties released since the 90's are in high demand for the fresh food market. Some mid-sized apple orchards (~500 trees) are either privately owned or are left over from the last round of trials from various crop research programs and agencies. Additionally, many people are getting into the cider-making business, taking advantage of the unique flavours and qualities of Canadian prairie-grown apple varieties.

Although no formal apple tree variety development is underway, many hobbyists still grow, collect, graft and breed apples across Alberta. While large orchards are often located rurally, it is still a common practice for small urban lots to have one or two apple trees established on their property for homeowners to enjoy their own home-grown apples. The pioneering story of the apple tree species in Alberta continues today with the quest to persevere and grow the perfect prairie apple.

REFERENCES

Friends of the U of A Devonian Botanic Gardens. (1991). Edible Apples in Prairie Canada.1991<https://research-groups.usask.ca/fruit/documents/other-crops-/Edible-Apples-in-Prairie-Canada.pdf>