

## Were Old Varieties Best?

Several years ago, I spoke with a person who grew up during the depression who was especially fond of several fruit cultivars her father raised at that time. She lamented that many of these cultivars were no longer available, and she wished she could eat them again. I have always remembered this conversation because it perked my interest in heirloom fruit that continues to this day.

Along these lines, over the last several weeks I have been working on an heirloom fruit project that gave me opportunity to further research several formerly popular cultivars. One, named Potawatomi plum, was once widely planted in the Intermountain West. According to an agricultural experiment station book published in 1910 called "The Plums of New York" the variety was found in 1875 in Tennessee. People quickly recognized its excellent flavor, cold hardiness and disease resistance and it became popular throughout much of the United States. The book states that the same plum "is possibly of greater cultural value than any other of its species especially for northern latitudes. It's of high quality...the texture of the fruit being especially pleasing in eating, and though melting and juicy it keeps and ships well because of its tough skin". The plum is still found on old homesteads and roadsides, but it is no longer commercially available, to my knowledge.

Many wonder why cultivars as highly regarded as the Potawatomi plum lose favor. The reasons are many. Culturally, eating habits change. I have spoken with multiple nursery owners who state that the number of plums they sell has greatly declined over the last several years.

Economics also play an important role. New fruit cultivars are regularly introduced by breeders and nurseries. These offer greater choices to consumers and often have superior characteristics. These may include such things as better flavor, ripening more consistently for easier harvest, resistance to bruising, increased disease resistance and retaining quality longer in storage than older cultivars. I have even been told by multiple local orchardists that to keep many of the older fruit cultivars in their orchards does not make sense because of the reasons listed above.

An example of a successful new fruit cultivar is the Honeycrisp apple. It has become wildly popular to the point that at least one local garden center has trouble keeping it stocked. It has good flavor, stores well, ripens consistently in our climate and is cold-hardy in most populated areas of Utah. Orchardists and home gardeners have planted it and other new cultivars in favor of older ones. One local orchardist told me recently that he sells dozens of bushels of Honeycrisp apples and very few of either Red or Golden Delicious, two older cultivars that have been losing favor with consumers.

With all of this being said, my favorite apple is the old fashioned Golden Delicious (discovered in West Virginia in 1905). I like the texture and flavor and will always have a tree in my home orchard. In a number of years I will also lament the fact that the fruit cultivars I loved are no longer available, like the person I mentioned earlier.

Doctor Teryl Roper, USU Plant Soil and Climate Department Head, made contributions to this column.