

Yard and Garden – 10-10-09- Ted Griess/ Extension Horticulture Assistant

I've often boasted that nothing beats the flavor of a freshly-picked, garden-ripened tomato. Recently, I discovered a similar find. Last Friday, I had the opportunity to eat a locally grown, tree-ripened apple. I experienced an epiphanic moment. Without a doubt, I can now easily boast, "Nothing beats the flavor of a color-picked, tree-ripened apple."

Nestled in among the corn and soybean fields, approximately one mile southwest of Riverdale, Nebraska, is an apple orchard called *Apple Acres*. This orchard has been located there for many years, but just recently, I paid it a visit.



The orchard is owned and operated by Keith and Bev Nuttelman along with their two sons, Chris and Jared. The Nuttelmans have lived at this location for nearly twenty-five years. Prior to purchasing the property, it was owned by Merlin Berglund. Berglund originally created the orchard by planting and managing over twelve hundred trees on fourteen acres. After purchasing the property, the Nuttelmans quickly learned the challenging business of raising apples. For a number of years, they actively sold apples on a commercial basis, wholesaling their apples to area businesses.

About fifteen years ago, they changed direction. Many of the older standard-sized trees were becoming less productive and due to their larger size, difficult to manage. As a result, they removed the older trees and started anew. Today, they manage a four-acre orchard, consisting only of grafted, semi-dwarf trees. Here grow three hundred apple trees consisting of nine varieties. They include Gala, Fuji, Red Delicious, Yellow Delicious, Honey Crisp, Jonathan, Jonagold, Empire and York.



When I asked Keith about the life span of an apple tree, he responded, "If a tree is properly cared for, it can produce for many years, but the market and the public's demand determine the varieties that we grow. If a particular variety falls out of favor with the public, that may dictate it's time to replace."

Today, the Nuttelmans only sell retail. They describe their business as "no frills," directing their attention to selling apples and apple cider.

"One of the joys of this business is meeting and visiting with interesting people," commented Bev.

Although they sell at local area Farmers Markets, the biggest share of their business comes from customers stopping by the orchard and purchasing directly. In years past, they've had customers from as far as Kansas and Michigan; however, most customers are local area residents, many of whom are return customers.



Since not all varieties of apples mature at the same time, their market begins around September 1st and lasts usually into late December, occasionally with some carryover into January. The month of October is the peak season.

Emphasis is on color-picked, tree-ripened apples! Rather than having the customers pick apples, the Nuttelmans prefer hand picking the fruit themselves when they are color-ripe and at their best. They, then sort, bag, and chill the apples, locking in the freshness. Their coolers can hold up to seven hundred bushels of apples at one time.

After purchasing apples, to maintain freshness, one should store them at temperatures near 45°F to 50°F. Avoid temperature fluctuations. Always keep a vigilant eye on stored fruit, for as the saying goes, “One bad apple can spoil the whole bunch.”



From my visit, I soon realized that growing apples successfully on such a grand scale is definitely labor intensive. Trees need to be hand-pruned at the proper time, fertilized, watered and monitored for insect and disease pest management. Furthermore, Nebraska's fickle weather can create its own problems. Freezing temperatures, heat, hail and drought name a few. The day I was there, Nebraska's wind was gusting over fifty miles per hour. Sadly, I saw a number of perfect apples being knocked from the trees. With a smile, Keith commented, “Fallen apples are never for sale —they get fed to the cattle — and cattle love them.”

As I was heading back to Kearney, I glanced down and lying on the seat beside me were two bags of apples the Nuttelmans had shared with me as a parting gift. Temptation got the better of me. While keeping my vehicle under control, I managed to wrangle one of the plump, reddish gold Jonagold apples out the bag and take a bite. At that moment, I had my epiphany. Now I boast, “Nothing beats the flavor of a color-picked, tree-ripened apple!”

Before they are all gone, I urge you to check out *Apple Acres* at 7460 West 100th Road, rural Riverdale, Nebraska. I am convinced, once you try a fresh, color-picked, tree-ripened apple, you, too, will make a similar boast.