

Famous Apple Trees

Johnny Appleseed probably never visited Wisconsin. But since apple seeds were easily carried in a small bag, many early settlers brought them to the state and planted them on their new homesteads. In 1936 the *Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer* asked its readers to send in nominations for the state's oldest apple tree. Fruit trees do not have a particularly long lifespan, and 60 years of age is considered quite old. Some remarkably long-lived trees were reported, however.

A man in Racine wrote that several trees planted in a small orchard on his land in 1844 were still bearing fruit after 92 years. A West Allis correspondent reported trees 86 years old, and others told of trees 54 years old or older.

Mark Nachtwey, from Maribel, recalled that his mother, the first white woman married in that area, planted a small orchard from apple seeds in 1842. One tree, a crab, was left and still bearing fruit in 1936, 94 years later. The tree stood at the east end of the town of DePere in Brown County, eight miles east of the city of DePere.

It was not until 1891 that the Wisconsin Horticultural Society, 20 years after its founding, first planted trial apple orchards comprising 56 varieties. Most of the early varieties are no longer grown, but two are still popular. Northwestern Greening, originated near Iola in Waupaca County in 1872, is favored for its uniform size and adaptability for freezing and canning. The Wolf River variety—described as “large, red, tender and of good flavor”—appeared in 1875 and was mentioned in the Wisconsin Horticultural Society Annual Report.



Gays Mills: famous for its surrounding apple orchards

B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1982)

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In Southwestern Wisconsin, eight or ten apple growers along the Kickapoo River, a good apple growing area, exhibited their fruit for the first time at a Wisconsin State Fair in 1905. Gays Mills is famous today as the center of more than 1,200 acres of apple trees.

Bayfield also saw early beginnings of the apple industry. Its port was accessible by boat so transportation to markets was no problem even before the railroad came in 1883. The Wealthy variety, and more recently the MacIntosh, have been widely grown on the Bayfield Peninsula, the northernmost commercial fruit growing area in the United States.

In Door County, too, early horticulturists discovered the thumb extending into Green Bay had a climate remarkably suited to growing fruit, and commercial apple orchards were planted, as well as cherries and plums, in the last decade of the 19th century.

The weather along Lake Michigan from Sheboygan to Kenosha is also good for fruit trees. Some of the families in this part of the state have been growing apples for five generations.

Sources: Arthur and Olga Bassett, Baraboo