PACIFIC COAST FARMERS' MARKET ASSOCIATION

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HEIRLOOM APPLES – A TASTE OF HISTORY

The aroma of apple pie on a September day, the smooth flavor of homemade apple butter on toast, or a tempting square of apple cake can signal fall is on its way. Your farmers' market has a seemingly endless selection of heirloom apples, most of which are relatively uncommon. Each apple brings its own history and interesting name.

After almost disappearing, older apple varieties, popular 50 to 100 years ago, have been making a comeback. Discerning farmers' market customers have learned to differentiate between a delightfully sweet or tart heirloom apple and the waxed, shiny, almost tasteless, varieties that are available in the supermarkets. Each heirloom has a distinctive flavor profile, gorgeous skin color, and crisp bite that are sure to become favorites.

Many of the commercial apple varieties we see in grocery stores are hybrids, combining the favorite attributes of various heirlooms - namely, predictable traits of size, color, transportability, and storage life. Heirlooms, on the other hand, are open pollinated and have been preserved and passed along for generations in their "pure" form. These heirlooms are particularly important for genetic diversity. Maintaining rich genetic diversity is essential for increased disease resistance, temperature hardiness, and for preserving the species.

Today many apple growers have returned to growing heirlooms. Gravenstein apples, a variety named by the Danes, meaning “gray stone,” was introduced to Northern California in the 19th century by Russian fur traders. It is one of most common heirloom apples and grows mostly in the Sebastopol area. The heritage Fuji and Pink Lady apples also have a long history. These apples, among others, were brought back from near extinction by local farmers who desired to save these older breeds. These farmers and local farmers’ markets have been first in line to offer these special apples to customers. Direct to market sales have increased their visibility and desirability.

Thick-skinned apples, because they hold their shape, tend to be good for baking whole. Try Fuji, Pink Lady, or Gala. You might find the early harvest Gravenstein apple, one of the true heirloom varieties still grown. They’re good for apple sauce, cider, and just plain good eating. Tart apples are best for baking because their flavor holds up. Try pippin, Granny Smith, Empire, or Rome.

There are some wonderful varieties of heirloom apples offered at your farmers’ market. Rainbow Orchards from Apple Hill in Camino offers quite a few varieties. J&J Ramos Farm from Hughson has a nice selection. Lujan Farms from Hughson and Ken’s Top Notch in Fresno have some lovely apples. Varieties from these farmers range from the more common heirlooms like Pink Lady, Gala, and Fuji apples to the delicious Jonagold, Braeburn, Mohawk, Chieftain, and Heaven Sent.

This fall, visit your local certified farmers' market where you’ll find a wide range of this tasty fall fruit, where the farmers who grew and harvested them bring them to you.

TAGS

apples