

The World of Apples

Of Diversity and History



The Apple – A Fruit Full of History and Stories

For many people, an apple tree is simply an essential part of the home garden. Perhaps an old tree already stands there, its branches laden with fruit year after year.

Apples also grow in traditional orchards, where fruit trees are scattered across meadows and pastures. This traditional form of cultivation provides a valuable habitat for many animal and plant species.

And then, of course, there is the pleasure of eating them: apples taste delicious fresh from the tree, in cakes or muesli, as apple purée, juice, cider, vinegar or dried fruit. Depending on the variety, they can be sweet and mild, tart and refreshing, or spicy and aromatic.



Image: AI-generated

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From Central Asia to Our Gardens

The history of the cultivated apple probably began in Central Asia. One of its most important wild ancestors is the Asian wild apple, *Malus sieversii*, which grows in the mountainous regions of the Tian Shan. Along trade and migration routes, apples spread westwards. Along the way, they cross-pollinated with other wild apple species, including the European crab apple. Over time, these natural crosses, together with human selection, gave rise to the cultivated apple we know today.



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Apples were already being grown in Europe in ancient times. The Romans knew a variety of apple cultivars and spread fruit growing throughout the territories of their empire. Grafting also played an important role: a shoot from the desired variety, known as a scion, is grafted onto a suitable rootstock. This allows a variety to be propagated while preserving its characteristic traits. The rootstock influences, among other things, how vigorously a tree grows.

Over the centuries, countless apple varieties emerged. Climate, soil and human preferences all shaped their development. Some varieties were prized for their flavour, others for their early or late harvest, their keeping quality, or their suitability for baking, cooking and cider-making.

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A Great Diversity

The exact number of apple varieties worldwide is difficult to determine. Estimates vary, depending in part on whether they include only varieties currently in cultivation or also historical and regional varieties. One thing is certain: the diversity is immense, even though supermarkets generally offer only a limited selection.

Varieties such as Elstar, Gala, Braeburn, Jonagold, Golden Delicious, Boskoop, Cox's Orange Pippin and Granny Smith are familiar to many people. Others are more commonly found in traditional orchards, varietal collections or specialist nurseries. Old and regional varieties, in particular, often tell stories of the places where they originated or became especially popular.

This is also true of northern Germany, where our businesses are based. Names such as Altländer Pfannkuchenapfel, Finkenwerder Herbstprinz and Holsteiner Cox evoke the close connection between apple growing and the region. However, the origins and histories of individual varieties are not always clearly documented. A name alone does not necessarily tell the whole story.



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Apples in Stories, Art and Science

For centuries, the apple has appeared in paintings, stories and symbols. In the story of Adam and Eve, it is traditionally regarded as the forbidden fruit, although the Bible does not specify what the fruit actually was.

An apple also plays an important role in Greek mythology. At a wedding to which she had not been invited, Eris threw a golden apple inscribed “For the Fairest” among the guests. Hera, Athena and Aphrodite all claimed it. Zeus left the decision to Paris, the Trojan prince. Each goddess promised him a reward. Aphrodite offered him the love of Helen, and Paris awarded her the apple. As Helen was married to Menelaus, king of Sparta, Paris’s decision led to the Trojan War. Here, the golden apple symbolises beauty, temptation and far-reaching consequences.

Isaac Newton, too, is associated with an apple story. According to tradition, in the 17th century he was contemplating motion when he saw an apple fall from a tree. He is said to have wondered whether the same force that draws an apple towards the Earth also keeps the Moon in its orbit. Newton developed the theory of universal gravitation and published it in 1687. There is no evidence that an apple actually fell on his head. The familiar scene is a later anecdote illustrating his line of thought.

The Imperial Orb is not a fruit but a symbol of sovereignty: a golden sphere surmounted by a cross. In coats of arms, an apple or apple tree may refer to a place name, a family name or regional fruit growing. Its meaning depends on the particular coat of arms.

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A Tree for Your Own Garden

An apple tree does more than produce fruit. It transforms the garden throughout the seasons: it blossoms in spring, provides shade in summer, and invites us to pick and taste its fruit in autumn. Apples can be turned into cakes, purée or juice, and some varieties can be stored for later.



When choosing a tree, it is worth considering the right variety and growth habit. How much space is available? Will the apples be eaten fresh or mainly used for cooking and baking? Is a suitable pollinator variety needed? Questions like these help you find a tree that suits your garden and your personal taste.

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Apples consist largely of water and contain dietary fibre, including pectin, as well as vitamin C and potassium. The exact amounts vary depending on the variety, ripeness and storage conditions. The familiar saying “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” is best understood as a reminder of the value of a varied diet. A single apple cannot prevent illness or replace a balanced diet.

Whether crisp and fresh, baked in a cake or pressed into juice, the apple combines a rich cultural history with an impressive diversity of varieties. Perhaps that is precisely what makes it so special: it is part of everyday life, yet its taste is always a little different. And anyone who plants a tree brings a piece of this history into their own garden.