



Tales from the Greenhouse, #7

History Through a Horticultural Lens

Edition #7 May 2024

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Apple Orchard Forest

By Matthew Martin

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“When eating a fruit, think of the person who planted the tree”.

-Vietnamese proverb

“Apples should be eaten outdoors in the conditions in which they survive. Wind, sun and rain are also the conditions they should be consumed”.

-Henry David Thoreau

“Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree”.

-Martin Luther



In the spring of 2015, the community came together to plant over 30 heirloom apple trees in the south meadow of Glen Magna Farms. The project initially started in the winter of 2014 when I stumbled upon some old records inside the Endicott mansion. The records mentioned a large apple orchard of Russian variety residing in the south meadow. Upon reading the record, my immediate response was to restore this historic garden of Glen Magna Farms. Little did I know that it would lead me to such a wonderful experience of learning new aspects of horticulture, education, history, environmental stewardship, culture and, above all, meeting and working with passionate members of our community.

As I began to plan, I wanted to make sure that the apples planted would be historic and of Russian variety. Also, being a nonprofit meant that I was on a tight budget. Luckily, our friends from Bartlett Tree Experts were able to donate dozens of Russian apples for the restoration project. These heirloom apples are known as Antonovka and they date back to 1826 in western Russia. In Russia, this apple is also known as “The Peoples Apple”. The Antonovka apple is a fruit tree that is extremely cold tolerant and can survive the harshest of New England winters.

While planning for this project, I knew the community had to be involved in some way. Eventually, the idea occurred to me that each tree should be planted by a member of the community. Not only would this restoration project be an opportunity for education, but it would also be a way to foster people’s connection to the land and beauty of Glen Magna Farms. I always believed that rolling up your sleeves and getting dirty to plant a tree creates an automatic reward system within a person. A person who plants a tree will inherently care for that tree and the land that it grows on. Having people of all ages, especially the next generation, plant this orchard was a perfect way to get them interested in preserving our heritage and the land we live on. Without a doubt, it was a wonderful experience to see over 30 people show up to partake in restoring a little part of our collective heritage.



Also, it was very important to recognize that I did not want to only have one variety of apple. Diversity in the orchard or garden is the key to its sustainability and longevity. For example, if you only have one kind of tree in your orchard and a particular pest or disease comes your way, it could wipe out your entire orchard. Having many varieties of apple

trees with different tolerances such as cold hardiness, disease and insect resistance and drought tolerance helps to ensure the long-term survival of an orchard. Another historic heirloom tree growing in our orchard is the Roxbury Russet. This apple is the one of the first apple varieties cultivated in America in the 17th century in Roxbury Massachusetts. Among others growing are Granny Smith, Macintosh and the delicious Winesap. Amazingly, we also have a very special pear tree growing in the orchard, a cutting of the world-famous Endicott Pear Tree. This tree was the first fruit tree planted by Europeans by Governor Endicott, the first Governor of Massachusetts.



I sometimes refer to the apple orchard as the “apple forest”. This is partly because we do not care for or grow these trees for the purpose of consumption. A farmer growing their orchard for profit usually cares more about apple production than about the long-term health of an individual tree. Apple trees are easily replaceable, and the typical pruning and farming practices generally exhaust the trees in an effort to grow ample amounts of fruit. Standard orchard care usually uses lots of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and fungicides. At Glen Magna Farms, we treat our orchard more like a natural forest, rather than your typical agricultural operation. That means not using chemicals and employing different pruning methods. Typical apple orchard pruning is removing the central leader of the tree and hollowing out the center. We do the exact opposite by allowing our trees to express their true apple form. Strong central leaders that reach for the sun allow for good, sound

structure. Also, we allow the lateral branches to extend sideways into the canopy of nearby trees, creating a tunnel that one can walk through. We may not get as much fruit as your typical orchard, but we are growing our trees for health, longevity and to honor the tradition of growing heirloom, historic fruit trees.

What has been an unexpected lesson in the creation and maintenance of our apple trees at Glen Magna has been the broadening of my own understanding of the various cultural outlooks on land and land management. For example, when Europeans first arrived in the Americas, they reported a vast untouched wilderness to those back home, which is still how we tend to learn about the Americas today. However, those early Europeans were unable to recognize that the “wild” or “pristine” land they were seeing was actually a highly cultivated space. Today, we know that indigenous Americans had sophisticated forms of land management that included agroforestry, prescribed burns and the manipulating waterways. Think of the Americas as being one giant garden where the forests were culled of non-food plants and replaced with food trees such the American Chestnut and other nut and berry producing plants. Sophisticated grafting techniques, pruning methods and vast plant trade networks stretching thousands of miles were all well established by indigenous cultures. However, when Europeans arrived with their own ideas of land management and their own perceptions of what a “cultivated landscape” looked like, they could not recognize that the American landscape they were experiencing was, in fact, cultivated.

This understanding also influenced my idea of an “apple forest.” When indigenous Americans got their hands on European apple trees, they planted thousands of orchards throughout the landscapes. This was a new tree to them, but they were already well aware of complicated grafting techniques and even planted orchards from seed. Their practice of caring for the orchard was different than the Europeans, such as pruning less, which helped to create apple “forest” rather than apple “orchards.” These apple forests survived much longer than European orchards and produced some of the most tasty and beautiful fruit trees. Some of them being the “buff” apple and the Nickajack (named after a creek) created by the Cherokee Nation. Therefore, when you walk the apple orchard/apple forest of Glen Magna Farms today, you may see several different management strategies in place. From European planting and grafting techniques to Indigenous pruning practices.



Land can be a lens in which to view multiple aspects of our culture. This small piece of land is no exception. My hope is that this orchard can be many things to many people- a reminder of the community coming together to serve, a place

of cultivation, a historical record, a place to enjoy the natural world and a place to learn about our past and different cultures. Moreover, it is my hope that the apple forest is around as a teaching tool for generations to come.

I would like to take a moment and acknowledge all the people that helped in the restoration process.

- Thank you, Bartlett Tree Experts, for donating many of the trees.
- Thank you, Wild Birds Unlimited of Danvers, for donating blue bird boxes to help support our local songbird population within the orchard.
- Thank you to all the members of the community who came out to plant the trees.
- A big thank you to Danvers Historical Society staff Christian and Dana for helping maintain the trees over the years, especially during the drought of 2022.
- Thank you to all the Danvers Historical Society staff and board members for continuing to “preserve today for tomorrow.”
- Thank you to DHS president Tom Page and his family for planting trees, donating funds to help protect the apple sapling from browsing deer and his endless support and contribution he and his family made to help preserve our heritage in Danvers.



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