

As the busy summer season winds down, there is, on occasion, time for following that notion in the back of one's head or for exploring a path that may or may not be productive. There is, in pursuing that belief, reason enough to take a good look at the seedling apple trees on the farm.

We have two ancient Duchess of Oldenburg trees that still produce apples, and their largess this summer resulted in many jars of pale yellow applesauce on the shelves of the fruit cellar. But, the Duchess is a summer apple, reaching its peak in late August. We were ready for an apple pie this past week, so we set out to take a look at the seedling trees.

Some people call seedling trees "wild" apples, but I am quite sure that these trees are only as wild as the free youngsters who threw their apple cores into the gully from the top of a load of hay. Or perhaps, they were deposited by a bird or wild animal that had feasted on the fruits of a planted apple tree.

The thing about seedling apples that makes them so interesting is that, as we all know, apples do not breed true from seeds. To get an apple precisely like its parent, grafting, budding, or layering are used. So, it is necessary to try out the apples on the seedling trees. Some are nearly inedible. Others might taste okay but are so small or hard that they are of little use except to wildlife.

Along the gully at the south edge of the Big South Field are several seedling apple trees. They don't produce apples every year. Sometimes, in fact often, we have frost that destroys the crop in the blossom stage. But, this year, there were abundant crops of fruit on five trees.

These trees are not trimmed or pruned in any way. They are terrible examples of their species when it comes to appearance. But, they have apples this year, and we approached each tree with our homemade apple picker in tow.

Runo made the picker after seeing an "apple basket picker" in a catalog. Using it involved raising the small basket, attached to a very long handle, scooping an apple or several into the basket, and giving a little jerk to loosen the fruits from the twigs of the tree. Then, the apples

could be safely brought back from the top of even a very tall tree. Bruised apples, the kind we get if we shake the tree to make them fall, are soon useless.

Our picker is nothing more than a two quart vinegar bottle, cut to resemble the basket in the catalog, and attached to a long handle. It isn't perfect, but it does work.

One tree we left entirely alone. Its apples were thick on the branches, but they were tiny and hard. Another tree had lost most of its fruit, and deer and birds had eaten the fallen apples. But, three trees had enough apples--seemingly ready to harvest--to make it interesting. We picked from the ground and used the apple picker for the largest apples in the tops of the trees. We came home with two pails full of apples, one pail half full, and two big apples from the tree that had lost most of its fruit.

The second part of the apple trial involves using the fruit. We had sampled apples from three of the trees in the field, cutting each in half with a jackknife and eating a sliver. They all seemed to have possibilities for pie making.

At home, I made enough pie crust for a regular apple pie and six little pies. Earlier in the summer I had purchased a set of "patty pans" from the children's baking section of an Amish hardware store. I had always wanted some little pie pans like those when I was a little girl, and I did not hesitate to acquire a set now when I had a chance.

I peeled apples from the most prolific tree for a regular apple pie. As I pared and sliced, I speculated on the origin of the apples. Were these an offspring of the Wealthy trees in the yard that were destroyed in a storm? Or did the pristine white flesh hark back to a snow apple? Or were they seedlings of seedlings of seedlings, going back more generations than we might suspect? I had no answer for my musing, so I just filled my pie shell, added flour, sugar, and cinnamon, laid a few pieces of butter on top, and covered the pie with the upper crust.

For the patty pan pies, though, I had another idea. I made bottom crusts for all six little pies. Four of them, I filled with sliced apples from the trees from which we had picked. The two apples that were left on

the nearly bare tree were plenty for a miniature pie. When I put the top crusts on the pies, I marked them by making slits in the dough--one slit for the apples from the tree closest to the edge of the field, two for the next, and three and four for the remaining trees. Apples can look promising, but the real test is in the eating. The two little patty pans that remained became small blueberry and raspberry pies.

We tested the pies yesterday. It was heartening that tree number one, from which we picked the most apples, produced fruit that made delicious pie. The two apples from the second tree gave us a pie that was pretty bland. It just didn't have much flavor. Three and four made acceptable pies, but did not compare to the first tree. It was a bonus that tree number one also had the apples of the best quality. There were no wormy fruits or diseased ones, and though they were of varying sizes and shapes, they were basically sound apples. So, I peeled the rest of that variety and bagged them for winter pies. They are now biding their time in the freezer, waiting for the day that an apple pie is again on the agenda here on the farm.