

I remember my dad telling about childhood in the early 20th century and how hungry they were for fresh fruit. Before huckleberries (blueberries) were ripe and after wild strawberries were done, there was a “dry spell” for fruit. He and his siblings, according to the story, would hear a green apple hit the ground outside their bedroom window, climb out and onto the porch roof and then down to the ground in a race to be the one who got the apple. He said they ate the apples when they were very small and very green and all had stomachaches regularly that time of year.

We do not buy apples, so I wait almost as impatiently for the old Duchess of Oldenburg trees to have apples big enough to use. The Duchess is an early apple, though a little later than the Yellow Transparent. Thanks to my cousin, we did have a Transparent pie before the Duchess apples were edible, but I was still pretty glad when I could use the apples.

And, that first applesauce takes a lot of sugar! The Duchess is a tart apple when ripe, and the first fruits I peeled this year had perfectly white seeds, not a hint of the brown or black that indicates ripeness.

But, the Duchess apples ripen quickly when they start. These trees are over a hundred years old, aren't trimmed or sprayed, but they continue to bear year after year. The deer usually pick up the first fruits to drop, and there are never any apples under the trees when we check each morning. But, during the day, only the Plymouth Rock rooster and his nine hens make a dent in the fallen apples. We pick them up at evening chore time and take them to the two pigs. They are grateful.

Meanwhile, I pick the apples I want to use. Runo made a little apple picker that works like the wire ones that one can purchase. The manufactured versions have long handles and a little wire cage to catch an apple. Our version is made from a two quart plastic vinegar bottle and has a long, light wooden handle. With that device, I can pick apples from high up in the tree.

It is kind of a sport, really. And, eventually, my pail is full and I take my apples in and begin to peel.

After the Duchess apples are all gone, we rely on “seedling” trees that have good apples.. It is always interesting to taste apples from a tree that was obviously “planted” by a bird, an animal, or a kid throwing away an apple core. As apples don't “breed true,” one never knows whether a seedling tree will have apples that are good

to eat or cook or not. Some are sour, hard, and nearly inedible at every stage of ripeness. But, we have a few seedling trees that have good fruit, and we make the rounds through the fields and woods when apple season is here.

For now, though, it is still Duchess of Oldenburg season. They cook up into an almost translucent pie filling, and they make good sauce. But, when I am picking up apples for the pigs, I don't mind taking a bite or two from a nice looking apple. The pigs don't care.