

Feral Apples and Chokecherries

By Ashley McNamara

First of all, a warning: using wild apples and chokecherries to make your own edibles and libations is not for the faint of heart, or for lazy couch potatoes! It is a lot of work, but it is also a fabulously fun adventure and learning experience. Proceed at your own risk!

Apples: Apples are native to the Caucasus Mountains, an area that experiences continental climates with cold winters and warm summers but that generally tends to get more precipitation than the Front Range of Colorado does. As European settlers moved west across the North American continent, they brought apples with them, and of course apple seeds as well. Many of these germinated, either by intention or by accident, so apple trees sprang up wherever the pioneers went, as far West as eastern Kansas and Nebraska. At some point the Great Plains become too dry to support apple trees without supplemental irrigation, except for a few isolated specimens in riparian areas with year-round dependable water flow. Wild apple trees are quite few and far between by the time the plains meet the Colorado foothills. Traveling just a bit further west, though, the Rockies provide just enough moisture, especially in areas near creek beds and with a good southern exposure, for apple seeds from cores flung out of car windows to occasionally sprout, grow up and do quite well. In order to set fruit, some apple trees need to have another tree nearby for cross-pollination. Even self-pollinating types will set more fruit if they are close to another apple tree of a different variety.

Apples are heterozygous, which means that they don't inherit a lot of traits from their parent plants. A delicious, sweet eating apple that germinates and grows in the wild on its own is extremely rare, and it is also extremely rare that an eating apple will produce any offspring that will grow up to produce more eating apples. Chances are that these apples would be sour enough to put tears in your eyes if you were to simply bite into one. This doesn't mean that they can't be used, though. The settlers loved apples from these wild specimens and gathered them to make apple sauce, apple butter, apple pies, and especially, cider. You can do the same, if you know where trees are. Even crabapples (the only species of apple that is actually native to North America) can be used to make crabapple jelly.

Even if you don't have an apple tree on your property, you can still sometimes harvest apples from feral specimens. As a rule, anything that is on public lands is off limits, with the exception of roadside right-of-ways. The rules on these vary by county, so check locally to find out if these are available to you. Of course if the tree is on private property, you need to ask permission from the property owner.

The best time of year to look for apple trees is in the spring. Look for the white blossoms and petals that scatter with the wind as the flower begin to fade. Crabapples look similar but have pink blossoms instead. Apple trees aren't the tallest vegetation around, but they have a rather distinct form with branches arching out from the main trunk quite low on the tree and often curving gently towards the ground. It's great luck if you see another apple tree within about a mile due to the deal with cross-pollination. Once you've figured out where they are and have gotten permission from the property owner or county, it's a matter of waiting until late summer or early fall.

The window of time you have to harvest apples will vary by individual tree, its location, and to a smaller extent by the weather that particular growing season. Most apples ripen from about the end of August through the beginning of October. A few early varieties exist, with

ripening times as early as July, but these are the exception. When you go to collect apples, it's a good idea to wear long sleeves, pants and gloves to help protect yourself, since yellow jackets love apples as much as people do. As long as you collect during daylight hours and make plenty of noise as you approach the tree, you're unlikely to startle any bears that could be around. Pole picking tools are great but not entirely necessary. Nearly any long-handled tool can be used to knock apples out of the tree. Since you're going to be using these for pressing or cooking, a few bruises don't matter. Avoid using apples that are already lying on the ground, less for sanitary reasons than for the fact that there could be an angry yellow jacket underneath them! And of course don't forget to bring something to put your apples in- I find a large backpack works well, since I can just drop the apples in it over my shoulder while picking from low branches, then set it on the ground while I work on removing fruit from higher branches. Be sure to leave some fruit for the native wildlife.

I've used feral apples to make apple sauce and apple pies in the past. Here are some helpful hints for you if you decide to use your apples this way. It isn't completely necessary to peel the apples, but do cut out and discard the entire core as well as any bruises or maggot holes. For applesauce, chop the usable portion of the fruit on a cutting board, put in a heavy bottomed saucepan, add about 1 part sugar (white or brown) for every six parts chopped apple, a cup of water, apple juice or other liquid, and the juice of half a lemon. Cover and heat gently over low heat for two to three hours. If you're making pies, the apples can be left in bite-size chunks and used by themselves or with other kinds of fruit in your favorite apple pie recipe. Most people associate cinnamon with cooked apples, but try using lemon zest, cardamom, ginger or cloves instead for a new and interesting taste.

If you're making cider, here are a few of tips for you. As a general rule of thumb, it takes about 36 large apples to make a gallon of cider. Apples from wild trees tend to be small, though, so plan on gathering about 3 times this number for each gallon. Also, cider is best when it is made from a few different kinds of apples. It is fine to purchase some apples if you can't gather enough from the wild (growers will usually offer you a deal on seconds). A few crabapples can also be thrown into the mix. Apple maggots, bruises and blemishes do not harm the flavor whatsoever of cider, but avoid using any apples that have visible mold on them. If you don't have a press, don't despair- you can often rent one fairly inexpensively from your local home-brew store, and there are many different plans for simple homemade presses online (one actually uses a log splitter).

Chokecherries: Chokecherries are native to the Rockies and are a lot easier to find than feral apples. Look for the white to creamy yellow blossoms in long inflorescences in May. They prefer to grow in moist areas, often in small drainages. The leaves are look like those of a plum and the mature trees are short, topping out at about six feet tall. Even if you don't have any on your own property, chances are you know someone who does. The berries are ready for harvest from around the middle of August until early October, depending on factors such as elevation and exposure.

A word of warning about chokecherries: virtually every part of the plant is toxic due to the presence of a cyanide compound. Don't eat the raw cherries; they taste terrible anyway! The good news is that this compound is easily deactivated by cooking or exposure to oxygen, so you can harvest them and take them home to cook with or mash for juice without fear. Remove the individual fruits (called drupes) from the stems of the inflorescences and drop them in a bucket.

Many species of wild birds love chokecherries and depend on them as a food source, so don't take too many from any one plant or area. Adding sugar and heat to chokecherries transforms them from astringent and poisonous to distinctly delicious and flavorful.

(Irene- if you want to delete the chokecherry bit from this and save it for another time it might be better. The kids and I did go pick a bunch of chokecherries one time but we never did anything with them, so I don't feel that I can write much about how to use them from personal experience. I have a bit more knowledge about procuring feral apples, as I have done it a number of times. It dawned on me that Trudy has a lot of chokecherries on her property a bit too late this year- I should have taken pictures and tried to cook some up into jam.

Captions for the photos:

This beautiful apple tree in mid Coal Creek Canyon sits at the bottom of a steep, south-facing drainage. It produces a crop of tart, green-skinned apples every year. At the time of this writing, it is unknown whether the tree survived the flood or the reconstruction of the road that followed.



This small apple tree sits on my neighbor's property at an elevation of 7,900 feet. It would probably be more productive if it weren't shaded by several large evergreens, but it has managed to survive for many years.

