

THE POME FRUIT VARIETY CONUNDRUM



One of the questions that Gregory Cramond, National Evaluation Manager for the Australian Pome Fruit Improvement Program is frequently asked is; what variety of fruit would you plant? While this would seem a fair question to a "variety expert", it is not one that can be answered so easily. Here Greg covers just some of the things growers need to seriously consider when choosing a variety to plant.

Firstly, and most obviously; when you are choosing a variety; do you have a marketing plan? Think about how many industries apart from some sectors of horticulture and agriculture plant crops without knowing whether or not they have a market for their product. Before they would consider going ahead and investing most industries and enterprises would do a marketing plan, with projections of market share and expected profits ahead. It does not make in current conditions to plant a variety on a whim and hope that it might get market acceptance? While I am in no way suggesting that it is always possible to foretell market trends; is it worthwhile visiting the markets, talking to your agents, and perhaps getting a better handle on current trends. How many growers in the past have asked their marketing agents what to plant? How many have talked to their

agents/marketers about new varieties they themselves were considering planting, and why? How many growers have talked to their agents about how they thought a new variety would or should be marketed and where? Why is it that these things rarely take place? As growers concerned with our future income, the most important thing to consider when we plant a new variety is; just what do we intend to do with this thing once we've got it.

In the last paragraph I said "what do we do with this thing once we've got it" because I believe that once any grower gets a desire to grow a variety, they can and will grow it. Generally the cultural practices of modern orchardists are high enough to successfully grow a variety to maturity. One can argue forever about what training systems are used, climates, rootstocks, thinning requiems, etc, but generally apples and pears regardless of variety can be grown by anyone in the game. One of the things my travelling has taught me is that except for a few varieties, the varietal mix is similar in most areas. So, even with all the different climates growers can grow most varieties, if the desire to do so is there. Further, if there is a return on that variety, it will be grown, regardless of perceived merits of growing it in an unsuitable or suitable climate. When returns are considered, long-term profit must be considered. If a "quick buck" is the aim, then one must consider what variety is in the pipeline that will replace the profitable, but short-lived variety you are planting now. After saying all that, it is I believe *extremely* important for individual growers and to the industry as a whole (in the long-term) to plant varieties that are suitable for a growing area's climate. This will

become increasingly important as market demands push quality parameters higher and higher. The need to achieve quality consistency for a variety or a market will also become increasingly important.

How does one consider what to plant for the long term? Many people have said to me that they can't keep up with all these new varieties.

Consider these facts:

The world apple market is dominated by 12 varieties, of these only Royal Gala is anywhere near new and that was found in 1971. Golden Delicious is the world's most popular apple and that was discovered in 1890. Even in the eighties with a rush to plant the "new" spur type Red Delicious; "Starkrimson" was found in 1952.

The world pear market is dominated by even less varieties than is the case with apples. Some of these pear varieties have origins dating back more than three centuries. None of the dominant pear varieties are anywhere near "new".

While I'm not saying that having a market dominated by so few varieties is necessarily a good thing, it does illustrate that some varieties don't wax

and wane as fast as people think, and that there is longevity in *good* varieties.

I can hear people suck in air when I say good varieties about current market leaders in the variety game. But, I stick by the comment and qualify it by saying that these dominant varieties didn't get to be market leaders by a fluke. Sure they have their problems, but they have been selected from a myriad of past varieties for some definite and desirable qualities.

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Consistent eating quality is one, but disease resistance, storage ability, regular cropping of good-sized fruit are others. I have a collection of antique apples on my own property, and can plainly see why my grandfather passed by some of these, interesting, maybe, but troublesome varieties. Red Delicious is a good example. Many claim that it eats like cardboard, but this is patently not true if the variety is picked at an optimum stage of maturity. Red Delicious has many desirable characters: It is somewhat resistant to Powdery Mildew (and hence russet) and Fire Blight, with good crop regulation it has good consistent production of regular sized fruit, is usually a single pick variety, and is an easily managed tree. So there are many reasons for the grower to like it. The marketers liked it too, because it was attractive, consistent, and had good supply. Consumers liked its looks, and bought it, and still do, but for reasons well known it's popularity is on the wane. But, even so there is still a substantial market for this variety and growers should as much as possible investigate potential. But unfortunately, our main pome fruit varieties have simply become commodities, and production systems based around them must be very efficient to be profitable. A grower may choose to plant one of the "commodity" varieties, and if so still needs to consider these things, with completely efficient production the aim. Information is available to show growers about training systems that are productive, economical to establish, utilise dwarfing rootstocks, and are complementary to IPM and IFP.

So what is on the horizon? There are many new varieties being introduced into the country, and plenty more to come. What percentage of these will be here for the long run, I don't know. A grower wishing to plant a new variety will have to consider that in many cases the choice is not his to make. Many new varieties will come with marketing plans and production targets already mapped out.

"Closed Loop" marketing plans with selected growers growing limited production to strict quality parameters are it seems the way of the future. In order for marketers and variety owners to maximise returns (and not necessarily longevity) from new varieties they will try to separate them from the "commodities" by limiting production and maintaining high and consistent quality. In order to achieve these quality parameters variety managers may even require certain cultural practices be adhered to i.e. training systems, rootstocks, chemical use, etc, be within guidelines outlined when a grower signs up to grow a variety. All this may sound somewhat Orwellian, but it may not be all bad for growers. In most cases the variety owner/manager will not have the expertise or time to grow a variety, and will require specialist growers for his variety. It may be regulated, but everyone in the supply chain has to make a profit for it to work. As to the aforesaid horizon, open-access varieties as a choice will be much more limited, and growers need to be better informed as to what is available to them.

To obtain the necessary information required when deciding what to plant a grower needs to review not only nursery catalogues. Good background information on a variety's growth habit, vigour, maturity dates, storage ability, disease resistance, and of course it's market potential, should be investigated. Knowing your site, your current varietal mix, and needs of your intended markets, are all obvious points, but can't be understated.

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When it comes to a variety's suitability for your site; how does a grower obtain this information? This is where the APFIP Evaluation Program hopes to fill in some of the 'grey area' for growers. This Program has been set up with the ideal of providing growers and variety owners with area specific data about variety performance. Not only will area specific variety performance data be provided, but also comparisons between

growing regions, and on different rootstocks. APFIP will provide independent performance data, based on records and observations from sites set up in all the major pome fruit production areas of Australia. The aim is to help people in their decisions about what to plant, where to plant it, and hence meeting the needs of a particular market.

I certainly haven't helped growers with the initial question: What variety would *you* plant? But, I do hope that I've made people think a little before they rush out and order a new variety. Let's face it; we all want to get into something new and interesting and expect

the market to be clamouring for it. But, ultimately a variety must fit your operation, must have critical mass of supply, and must be profitable. A variety needs to be more than just excellent to look at and have great eating qualities. I say this last point because at this point of history there are many excellent apples, but many of them will never achieve any market penetration regardless of their obvious qualities. So nothing is easy, gone are the days when we can plant and hope. We must enquire, peruse, prepare, plan, plant, and then hope!



Mariel Starr picking apples on her parents Certified Organic Property at Red Hill on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula