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Garden advice
The origin of our local Gravenstein apples

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Gravenstein apples at Dutton Ranch in Sebastopol. By Beth Schlanker – The Press Democrat 2016

Question: What can you tell me about the origin of our local Gravenstein apple?

A: That's a great question! Let's start with the origin of apples themselves, as there is much more known about that than the Gravenstein.

Wild apples originated in Central Asia in Kazakhstan, specifically in an area west of the Tien Shan Mountains. These trees produced large but rather soft, bland-tasting fruit. Thousands of years ago those apples began moving west with various travelers and caravans via the Silk Road. Dropped seeds grew into trees, which crossed with sour wild crabapples, producing apples with better flavor and texture. Genetic research shows that our modern domesticated apple is a hybrid containing genes

from at least four wild species of apple from the cooler climates of Europe, the Near East, and Central Asia.

There is evidence of apple domestication as early as the 10th century B.C. The seeds of an apple will not produce the same apple it came from; to produce the same apple, cuttings must be grafted to another apple tree. The important technique of grafting was probably discovered in Mesopotamia as early as 3,800 years ago. Grafting technology passed through the Persians and Greeks to the Romans, who perfected orchard management and passed them on to the rest of western Europe and Britain.

In the fourth century B.C., Greek naturalist Theophrastus described six varieties of domesticated apples and discussed budding, grafting, and general tree care. By the first century B.C. Pliny the Elder described 20 varieties of apples.

In the early 1600s, colonists planted European apple trees in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Unlike Europe, apple varieties in early America were usually not grafted and most fruit came from seedling trees. The fruit was mainly processed for storage by drying, cooking, and especially by making cider. By 1669, the number of apple varieties grew to 92.

John Chapman, aka Johnny Appleseed, was very influential in spreading apple seedlings throughout the eastern and midwestern United States in the early 1800s. By the mid-1800s, farmers began to select for fruit quality and grafted the varieties they liked best. By the late 1800s there were 643 apple varieties. Today there are about 7,500 varieties.

The Gravenstein apple, which is of unknown origin, arrived in Denmark in the 17th century. The story goes that it was discovered at a French monastery by Danish Count Carl Ahlstedt who brought branches home to be grafted onto an apple tree in his family's Grasten Palace. The apple was named "Gravenstein," the German variant of Grasten.



Gravenstein apples on one of the 70-year-old apple trees at Horse and Plow winery in Sebastopol, California on Wednesday, July 27, 2016. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

The Gravenstein apple was introduced to western North America in the early 19th century, perhaps by Russian fur traders, who are said to have planted a tree at Fort Ross in 1811. The Gravenstein apple was also introduced to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia in the 19th century. By 1859, Gravenstein trees were commonly cultivated on Nova Scotian farms where it is still considered the choicest apple by many Nova Scotians.

Today the Gravenstein apple is grown in Denmark, Norway, Austria, Australia, Canada, and the United States, where they are found most widely on the west coast, particularly in the Sonoma County town of Sebastopol. Horticulturist pioneer Luther Burbank praised the apple, saying if it could be had throughout the year, no other apple need be grown.

During the first half of the 20th century, Gravenstein was the major apple variety grown in western Sonoma County and was the source for apple sauce and dried apples for U.S. troops during World War II. Unfortunately, most of the orchards in Sonoma County are now gone due to a shift to wine production, and economic changes in the apple industry. The flavorful Gravenstein apples, which are good for both eating and cooking, are available in Sonoma County for a limited time in August. For more information about the history of apples: <https://tinyurl.com/57pe3mz3>

Contributors to this week's column were Wendy Stern, Lisa Howard and Robert Williams. The U.C. Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our information desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.