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Growing Organic Apple Trees

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I?m not an expert on growing apples, but I?ve been fortunate to be around apple trees for most of my life. When I was four, my parents built their house in the middle of a small, backyard orchard in southern Maine. The next door neighbor, who sold us the property, showed my father how to spray the remaining Cortland, Macintosh and Red Delicious trees so that the bugs wouldn?t destroy the apples. I clearly remember the day my father made the mistake of spraying while the blossoms were open, killing lots of my neighbor?s honeybees. After that, I always wondered if there was a way to grow apples without spraying.

When I planted my own trees, I selected disease resistant Redfree and Enterprise varieties, hoping I could find a way to grow apples organically. I tried a number of integrated pest management techniques, but didn?t have any success until last year when I covered the apples with footies. If you don?t know what I mean by footies, they are the little disposable socks that department stores give sockless people when they want to try on shoes.

How it works
First, when the apples are dime to nickel-sized, you prune all but the best apple from each cluster. Then you cover the apple with the footy and wrap the excess around the stem and tuck it in. The important thing is to cover them before the bugs get to them. Apple curculio starts pretty early.

One lesson I?ve learned is that in order to cover all the apples, you have to make sure the tree is properly pruned. Otherwise, it?s impossible to reach the interior apples without breaking apple-bearing branches. A properly pruned tree will allow for better air flow, which is important when using footies because the apples stay wet longer than if they were uncovered. Read my post on pruning at Nine Guidelines for Pruning Apple Trees [1]. Farmer Dave has a good Fruit Tree Pruning [2] guide, too.

A box of 144 footies at Store Supply Warehouse [3] costs about $15 (including delivery). You can reuse them year after year.

Some people remove the footies about two weeks before the apples are ripe to let the natural color develop. I leave them on because squirrels, chipmunks and deer are less likely to take a bit out of the covered apple. I still find a few apples with bites, but the squirrels don?t like the taste of the footy so they don?t return unless they are really hungry.

Here?s a short video of how to put the footies on the apples [4].

I understand some people use zip lock plastic bags to protect their apples from bugs. Let us know if you have a way to keep your apples clean without pesticides by commenting below.

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