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Invest in Your Food Future: Plant an Apple Tree

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The artist and writer Eric Sloane tells a true story in his 1965 book ?A Reverence for Wood? about an apple tree that perpetuates itself for more than 200 years. Growing on a hillside, it topples over with age, then the newly grounded branches send down roots. New shoots that spring up from those roots become trees themselves. Over generations, the phenomenon repeats itself.

Technically, the story is an apt illustration of layering, a propagation technique by which a branch is made to form roots in order to produce a new tree. Sloane shows you several ways to do that in his book. But he also sees the poetry in the process: ?As the fallen trunk decayed, new apple saplings had rooted all around it, giving the appearance of a family gathered around a dead giant on his bier. The old tree had dug its branches like fingers into the earth, a strange and striking sequence of resurrection.?

The tree was a Westfield, an old Massachusetts variety also known as Seek-No-Further, and it made me think of the old orchard on our farm, planted by my husband more than 40 years ago, with Golden Russets, Winesaps and other rugged apples. They?re still bearing heavily, even though they have that gnarly look old apple trees get, with crotches like armchairs. To add some more varieties we planted a new row of trees. This year, for the first time, they were covered with flowers.

Apples are slow. One we grew took more than 15 years to bear. And there are no shortcuts. A one-year-old whip will make better progress than an older, larger tree you transplant in. And for longevity it should be standard sized, not a dwarf (determined by the type of rootstock). Both apples and expertise can be found at Vintage Virginia Apples in North Garden, Va., near Charlottesville.

Now the peach tree ? there?s a quick fruit. Plant one and within three years you?ll be slicing peaches onto your cereal. But you?ll also be giving thought to its future replacement, because peach wood is fragile and the tree might not live 10 years. We grow peaches anyway, but planting an apple tree is making a gift to the future. So is planting a pear.

Thanks to the global seasonless diet, people today take their fruit for granted. Compare that with a Victorian?s enjoyment of a cosseted apple, pear or melon, properly ripened, at the end of a meal, with a slice of cheese. Which fruit is savored more?

Next time you think about buying a tree for your yard, consider planting an apple. Is that too big a commitment? Perhaps you don?t have kids or grandkids who?ll be there to eat the fruits. Maybe you bought your home at a great price and you?re waiting to flip it when the market recovers. Or you?re renting. Doesn?t matter. Some day, strangers may fill their pockets and aprons from your tree, and you will have fed them well.

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