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The Taming of the Trees

IFTA helped growers bring fruit trees down to size

By Dick Lehnert
Assistant Editor

On March 5, the International Fruit Tree Association observed its 50th birthday – marking a half-century of fruit growers working together to bring trees down to manageable size.

Logically, such an organization should have been born in Europe, probably in England. But the IFTA was born in Michigan, in the United States, and was at first all about dwarfing rootstocks for apples. Very successful, IFTA became worldwide in influence and broader in scope than apples and rootstocks.

For 400 years, the Europeans have known the character of apple trees was affected by the root as well as by the wood.

Wood makes the variety, so scions need to be grafted if varieties are to be perpetuated. The

ancient Romans knew that. But the Europeans also gradually learned that rootstock affects tree size, vigor, pest resistance, hardiness and to some degree fruit quality, and clonal rootstocks were selected and used in some parts of Europe.

In the United States, the Johnny Applesed concept – growing an apple from a planted seed – persisted much longer. Varieties and grafting became important as people ate more apples fresh and less as cider, and dwarfing rootstocks took even longer to catch on.

After World War II, U.S. apple growers gradually began to realize that size-controlling rootstocks could affect the way

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IFTA
Spotlight



Apple trees have gotten smaller and closer together as growers have used new rootstocks. At the IDFTA summer meeting in 1974, Englishman Eric Gunn demonstrated how to tame a standard tree with a chain saw, an approach that ultimately didn't prevail. 1974 photo taken near Grand Rapids, Mich., by Dick Lehnert

Primocane raspberries fit just fine on Maryland farm

By Dick Lehnert
Assistant Editor

If managing raspberries were easy, would they still sell for \$4.50 a pint? Nathan Milburn hopes so.

In 2001, Milburn Orchards ventured into raspberries for the first time. The Elkton, Md., family was expanding the retail farm market and agritainment side while contracting the wholesale apple side of the business. The Milburns were looking for crops that would diversify their market, and they looked at raspberries.

"Now, we kick ourselves for not doing them earlier," Nathan said.

He spoke about the crop during the Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention.

Raspberries used to be a lot of work, but the advent of a new kind of raspberry, primocanes, has changed the picture.

Primocane raspberries bear fruit in late



Nathan Milburn added raspberries to the farm in 2001 – and now wonders why he didn't do it earlier.

summer and fall on canes that sprout from the roots in the spring. The other, older kind – floricanes – bear in early summer on canes that grow the previous year.

Primocanes can be managed by flail-chopping the old canes right down to the

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Growers turning to federal H-2A labor program despite its flaws

By Matt Milkovich
Assistant Editor

An increasing number of growers are turning to the federal foreign labor program to find workers. They're not signing up because it's a great program, however. They're signing up because they're desperate, said Craig Regelbrugge, co-chair of the Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform (ACIR).

Regelbrugge doesn't have any hard data to back up his assertions, but he's seen anecdotal evidence that a deteriorating labor situation has forced growers all across the country to turn to H-2A, the government's temporary agricultural worker program.

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MILBURN

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ground each winter and starting over with fresh canes in the spring. With floricanes, last year's old fruiting wood must be pruned out by hand, leaving the young canes for the next year. It's a labor-intensive, scratchy business.

In Maryland, where the first killing freezes don't usually come until November, the late-bearing primocanes fit right into the busy fall marketing season with apples, peaches, pumpkins and other fruit at Milburn Orchards, Nathan said.

"It's a great window of opportunity for us," he said. "It's a perfect fit for the fall – if you have a fall.

"Our window is fairly long, from mid-August to the end of October. And if you want earlier berries, you can manage some as floricanes."

Further north, primocane raspberries struggle because a good part of the crop is lost when freezing weather comes. In New York, Michigan and other northern states, the easier-to-manage primocanes are being raised in season-extending high tunnels.

Milburn Orchards dates back to the 1900s, when Nathan's great-grandfather started a general farm. In the 1940s, Nathan's grandfather started the move toward fruit, and Nathan's father Evan and uncle John expanded the operation, which became noted for progressive orchard practices in peaches and apples. The operation covers about 400 acres.

Nathan's generation, which is just coming into management, includes his cousins Jay, David and Malinda. There's a next generation coming as well. Nathan's two children are Zoe and Eli, and his cousins also have children who work on the farm and may want to come into the business.

There is some specialization. Nathan works on the production side and his cousins run the agritainment and the market.

"We still sell some wholesale, but we want to sell everything through the farm market," Nathan said.

Nathan tries to grow what the market



Planting on raised beds in plastic keeps roots dry and prevents weed competition. Later, the plastic is removed.

needs and said the long-term plan is to add table grapes in 2007, blueberries in 2009 and strawberries in 2011. Their season now starts with sweet cherries, then adds floricanes raspberries, peaches, primocane raspberries and blackberries, apples and pumpkins. There also are school tours, hayrides and a petting zoo. Much of what they do is listed at www.milburnorchards.com.

Nathan is a pretty honest fellow, describing mistakes as well as successes. He regrets not putting in irrigation when planting the raspberries, he said. His concern was the other extreme, wetness, so the berries were planted in raised beds with plastic. The plastic was later removed.

"We will have to irrigate," he said.

A windmill has been installed to pump water to a tank, from which water will be delivered down the rows with drip tape. The windmill is a nice touch – he calls it "a Kodak moment" – that fits well into the agritainment picture.

The patch was designed with pick-your-own in mind, so rows are 14 feet apart. That also helps with equipment, since they use conventional orchard sprayers and mowers in the berries.

The 3-acre patch is open to u-pickers three days a week. On the other days, workers go through the patch, picking berries left behind. That not only serves to control disease in over-ripe berries, it supplies the market with ready-picked fruit. Berries are sold by the pound, producing no arguments over how full the containers should be. Saturdays, Sundays



This device is a post used to form the trellis each summer. Photos courtesy of Nathan Milburn

and Wednesdays are open to the public, with Wednesdays designated as senior citizen day – seniors get 10 percent off the price.

Managing primocane raspberries is not very labor-demanding, Nathan said. In mid-February, he had just finished flail-mowing the tops from last year's canes. No pruning required.

First, they removed the old trellis – but that was pretty easy. The trellis is not permanent, as it probably would be in a floricanes patch. There are permanent posts at the ends of the rows, but down the rows simple posts are installed after the plants are about 3 feet high.

These posts are made of rebar, with a T-top that is curved at the ends. The rebar is easy to drive into the ground. Posts are placed every 20 or 25 feet, depending upon the terrain. Baling twine is attached to the top loops and run down the rows to keep the canes from falling outward into the rows.

"Primocanes bear their fruit at the tops, so they need some support to keep them upright," Nathan said. "But our support system is easy to pull so we can mow in the wintertime."

Some effort is needed to keep the rows

2 to 3 feet wide. Mower drivers are encouraged to mow tight to the ground in row centers, while making sure not to cut into the mounds in the beds. Gramoxone herbicide applied next to the rows in spring helps keep the bed contained without doing permanent damage to vegetation.

Nathan encourages other growers to "keep about five plants of Heritage" as a "negative comparison" to other, better varieties they should plant. Varieties he likes include:

- Caroline produces good yields of small to medium berries that come early and taste great. The variety is not very heat tolerant.
- Anne, Alice and Kiwi Gold are yellow-orange-gold color. "They were hard to sell at first, but now they're the first ones sold out," Nathan said. "We sell some of them mixed with red berries in pints."
- Josephine, "our main variety for fall," is large, dark, flavorful and firm. "They rarely juice and cavity collapse is rare."
- Deborah is "a great way to end the season," Nathan said. While yield is lower, "berries are extremely large and flavor is good."

Primocane varieties can be induced to act like floricanes by summer pruning. Nathan does that to some so he can have early berries the following year. But it's hard on the plants, so he rotates eight rows, making them primocane one year and floricanes the next.

The raspberries have had no major problems with insects or diseases, Nathan said. He uses a weekly fungicide spray program to ward off gray mold and applications of insecticides against raspberry worm. He eliminates wild brambles from the area to minimize virus disorders.

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