

# Centennial Growers

## Milburn Orchards

By David Eddy  
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**P**ERHAPS there's no greater compliment to a grower than to be called progressive. John W. Milburn was such a grower. He was so progressive, in fact, that he planted Red Delicious apples. Say what? Well, pulling out producing standard, old-time Red Delicious and planting Starking Red Delicious was indeed considered progressive in 1938. Milburn was born in 1901, one year before his father, Esma Bowen Milburn, founded Milburn Orchards. Located in Elkton, a town in the north-east corner of Maryland smack dab between Baltimore and Philadelphia, Milburn Orchards remains a progressive operation a century later.

Esma Milburn ran a general farming operation. It was his son John who began specializing in fruit. He took the plunge in the depths of the Great Depression, a bold move that typified his approach, says his 64-year-old son, Evan. For example, John Milburn planted the Bisbee (also known as the Starkrimson) Delicious the first year it was available in 1956. "That was the revolutionary Red Delicious that started the craze of all the spur-type Red Delicious," says Evan. "He certainly had the guts to try all these new things."

### Times Of Experimenting

A few years later, John Milburn took another risk when he started using Malling 7 and MM. 106 rootstocks on all the varieties he planted. Many growers at the time thought that big trees were the way to go, so a semi-dwarfing rootstock like Malling 7 was looked on with suspicion. "It was considered a big chance back then," says Evan. "That was a big controversy."

In 1959, Evan and his brother, John T. Milburn, now 67, took over the 75



Esma Milburn (left) founded Milburn Orchards in 1902. His son John W. Milburn (right) experimented with new varieties and rootstocks in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1959, John's son, John T. Milburn (middle) expanded the size of the farm to 500 acres.

acres their father had farmed and began expanding the operation. They built it up to 500 acres, which is the size it remained until they recently sold 150 acres. The new generation continued on with their father's plans to reduce the size of the trees, moving on to Malling 9 for apples and planting sweet cherries on Gisela 5 and 6. All peaches are trained to 8 to 9 feet. In fact, Evan was featured in *American Fruit Grower* a decade ago for his efforts to implement the "pedestrian orchard" concept. His efforts, incidentally, have been brought to fruition. "As of five years ago," he says proudly, "we don't have a ladder on the farm."

Many growers favor larger trees because they think they can get more production, says a member of the latest generation to run Milburn Orchards, 33-year-old Nathan Milburn. He handles the farming end of the operation and his cousins, Jay and David Milburn, run the retail/agritourism division, which has become quite extensive. The Milburns prefer dwarfing trees because they don't need the production as much as they want to avoid the added labor costs, plus they want to get better-quality fruit. Because of that, the Milburns continue to visit

experiment stations in efforts to find smaller and better trees, which isn't surprising, especially when you consider that Evan Milburn is a past president of the International Dwarf Fruit Tree Association (IDFTA). "One thing he taught me is to constantly experiment," says Nathan of his dad. "And over the years we've learned what not to plant as well as what to plant," adds Evan with a chuckle.

In addition to serving as president of IDFTA, Evan Milburn has been president of the Maryland State Horticultural Society, and he and Nathan remain active in many associations. Education is a key component of the Milburn Orchards philosophy, and Evan continually drives it home, says his son. "Never think you know it all; never stop learning," says Nathan. "Go to meetings and get to know other people in the industry so you can call on them." The philosophy extends to day-to-day farming operations. "Every day is a learning experience, so he lets me make the decisions," says Nathan of his dad, before adding with a laugh, "but he never lets me make a big mistake."

### Finding A Niche

Though they continue to wholesale to markets up and down the East

