

APPLE

Malus domestica

“Ooh, it looks just like the one in the Ladybird books!”, I said when my mum first gave a bright red apple to each of us children back in Zambia, where I was brought up. Such a pretty fruit, but the taste was a real disappointment. These imported eating apples had probably spent so long in refrigerated storage they had lost their flavour and crisp texture. I know now that dry, mealy apple was ‘Red Delicious’, but had no idea so many other varieties existed until, years later, I visited a local London vegetable market as an adult. My eyes lit up as a whole new world of apples revealed itself and, with so many old and heritage varieties making a comeback, I still can’t say which is my favourite. Yet I knew one thing for sure: I wanted to grow an apple tree on my allotment. But which one?

Rekha’s favourites

‘Beauty of Bath’ (early)
 ‘Braeburn’ (late)
 ‘Elstar’ (patio variety)
 ‘Gala’ (mid)

Choosing the right tree

I wanted a tree that produced eating rather than cooking apples, and a variety suited to the conditions on my plot. Its eventual size was also a major factor

Garden tip

The most cost-effective way to buy an apple tree is to choose a bare-root “whip”. These are very young trees, dug up from the ground and sold with no soil around their roots. They are available during their dormant season from late autumn to winter. I went for a two-year-old apple whip and although it didn’t look very attractive, mine cost less than half the price of a pot-grown tree. But don’t worry if you’ve missed the bare-root season – you can buy container-grown apple trees all year-round.

because a large, spreading tree would cast its shade over my precious vegetables. With apple trees, this size is determined by the part growing beneath the soil (the rootstock) and my small tree was grown on a dwarfing rootstock. I’m also scared of heights – another reason for choosing a small tree. Mine will reach no more than 3m (10ft), and I can reach and pick the fruit using a small, three-step ladder.

I also kept in mind that planting a tree is not just for the here and now. One day I’ll leave the allotment, and I want the next plot holders to enjoy the fruits, too.

Planting the tree

Apple trees need a sunny, sheltered position (south- or southwest-facing is best) to produce a good harvest. For protection, I planted mine close to the greenhouse and shed, where it was out of the wind. Strong gusts can



Far left Blossom appears in mid-spring and can be damaged by frost. In cold regions, choose a late-flowering apple tree.

Left Following successful pollination of the flowers on the short spurs (see p140), small fruits soon begin to swell.

destroy delicate spring blossom, or blow insects off course before they've done their vital pollinating business.

I made sure the planting hole for my bare-root tree was twice the size of the rootball, then added plenty of good-quality compost up to just below the swollen part of the stem. It's important not to bury this part or you risk secondary roots sprouting from it and weakening growth. If you are planting a container-grown tree, it should be at the same depth it was in the pot.

Routine care

A layer of mulch in spring is so important for fruit trees. From March to April, I water the ground if the weather has been dry, then spread 5cm (2in) of homemade compost or leafmould around (but not up to) the base to make a circle 40-50cm (16-20in) in diameter. This provides much-needed nutrients in spring and helps to lock in moisture and keep down weeds. In hot summer weather, I water my young tree weekly, using a watering can rather than a hose so I know how much I've given the tree: a full can, holding 10 litres (2 gallons), should be enough.

Pruning

Fruit trees must be pruned to keep them healthy and productive, but this doesn't mean anxiously snipping off bits to give

the tree a light trim for fear of killing it! There is a process to follow and the best time to do this is winter, when the tree is dormant. But before making the first cut, I clean and sharpen my tools: secateurs for thin shoots, loppers for branches up to 4cm (1½in) in diameter, and a small pruning saw for any growth that is thicker than this.

On each branch, I locate the short spurs (growing points) that will bear flowers and fruit and make a note of the 3-4 strongest-looking ones. The rest are removed, with a clean cut above an outward-facing spur. The next task is to remove any branches that are crossing because they will rub and create wounds where disease can enter. It's also a good idea to prune branches that are growing into the centre of the tree. This opens it up and increases airflow to help keep disease at bay, as well as allowing more sunlight to reach the fruits.

Harvesting

Apples ripen at different times, from early-season fruits that can be picked and eaten in late summer to late-season varieties that ripen in October. I harvest my apples in September, when the fruits are a good colour and come away easily with the stalk attached. I'm always careful not to drop my apples or they'll bruise and won't store well.



Above left When leaves and blossom appear, it's time to hang up a sticky trap for natural pest control (see Garden tip).

Above During the "June drop", some apples will fall naturally from the clusters, which helps to thin them out.

Bottom Pick apples by gently cupping the fruit in your palm, then giving it a light twist.



Garden tip

Apples are magnets for a particular pest: the small codling moth. The females lay eggs in early summer and the caterpillars burrow into and eat the developing fruit. The first time I harvested my apples, I noticed the tiny entry and exit holes, but when the apples were cut open they had brown, rotten patches. I now buy pheromone traps to hang in the tree in early spring. These sticky traps attract and catch the male moth before it can get anywhere near the female.