

The Milton Early Italian Prune



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The Milton Early Italian Prune

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A new prune variety--Milton Early Italian--is available for unrestricted trial and distribution. While this variety is comparatively new and has undergone only limited testing it is being released at this time by the Oregon Agricultural Experiment Station because of the present widespread interest in a prune of this type.

Distinguishing Characteristics

The general tree and fruit characteristics of Milton Early Italian are essentially those of Italian, except for earliness of season. The fruit of the variety has consistently ripened from 10 to 14 days ahead of Italian when grown in adjacent plots. Another feature of the variety is its apparent freedom from virus or virus-like abnormalities, common in the prune orchards of the Pacific Northwest.

Origin

Although its origin is somewhat obscure, Milton Early Italian appears to be a sport or bud mutation of Italian. The original branch from which it came grew in the experimental plots of Dr. E. L. Reeves, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Plant Pathologist at Wenatchee, Washington. The branch itself had developed from a bud inserted into a peach tree by Dr. Reeves for the purpose of testing its freedom from virus diseases. Because the branch appeared to be free of virus, the late Dr. S. M. Zeller obtained propagation wood from it and grew trees from this material in 1943. These trees were designated as selection E-76 and were set out at the Plant Pathology Experimental Farm at Corvallis. When the trees came into fruiting, the early maturing feature of the selection became apparent and it was then included among the new varieties in the varietal testing plots of the Experiment Station.

The Oregon Agricultural Experiment Station has no knowledge as to the performance or final disposition of the original branch at Wenatchee, Washington. The branch was not fruiting at the time the propagation wood was obtained and whether or not it ever manifested the early maturing tendency as did the trees at Corvallis does not appear in the records. Apparently, the identity of this branch was lost a number of years ago.

Trial Results

The trial data so far obtained show that the fruit of Milton Early Italian is identical to that of the parent variety as to size, shape, color, flavor, and texture. Its tree is also identical to that of Italian in growth characteristics, fruiting habits, and foliage properties. Like Italian it appears to be fairly hardy to winter cold. Trees of the variety developed no trunk or limb injury symptoms following the severe subzero freeze at Corvallis in 1950 and also following the cold spell of November 1952.

During the period of trial, the trees of the variety have remained vigorous and healthy. The foliage has been free of mottles, necrotic spotting, and other leaf abnormalities. When tested for viruses on such indicators as Bing and Montmorency cherries,

Shirofugen and Kwanzan flowering cherries, and the J. H. Hale peach, no virus reactions have occurred. Nurserymen propagating trees of the variety have consistently obtained good sets of buds and the young trees have grown vigorously in the nursery.

Observations of the handling properties of the variety indicate that its fruit goes through about the same stages of development and ripening as does the fruit of Italian. Apparently, it can be harvested at stages of maturity comparable to those satisfactory for Italian. Storage tests have shown that the keeping quality of its fruit is equal to that of Italian and that it holds up as well as Italian after reaching full maturity.

Processing tests involving comparison of Milton Early Italian and Italian were conducted over a 3-year period. These tests showed that the canning quality of the two varieties is essentially the same. No significant differences were noted as to the color, texture or flavor of the product. Dehydration tests were not made but it is not likely that the new variety will differ from Italian in drying properties.

Pollination tests indicate that the variety, like Italian, is self-fruitful. It has set satisfactory crops since it came into bearing 5 years ago. Its floral morphology is identical to that of Italian, although its blooming period is generally 4 or 5 days ahead of Italian.

Limitations

It should be pointed out that while Milton Early Italian now appears promising and fully worthy of commercial trial, its ultimate success as a variety cannot be fully predicted on the basis of the tests that have thus far been made. Final appraisal of the variety must await further testing under a wide range of climatic and soil conditions and it must await the time when fruit of the variety is grown in sufficient quantity so that the reaction of the trade and the consumer to it can be obtained. It is true, however, that varieties originating as bud sports usually follow the pattern of the parent variety as to cultural requirements and, because of this, it can usually be assumed that such a variety will do well under conditions that are suitable for the parent variety. Then, too, since the fruit of Milton Early Italian so closely resembles that of Italian, it is not likely that the variety will encounter trade or consumer resistance. More likely, the trade and the consumer will accept it as Italian.

It should also be pointed out that freedom from virus at this time does not mean that the variety will remain permanently free of such troubles. What it means is that the trees of the variety propagated now will be relatively free of known viruses at the time of planting. Research work done with the stone fruits in general has shown that such trees make vigorous growth when first planted and also remain healthy for long periods of time. Whether or not they will remain free of virus during the lifetime of an orchard has not been fully determined.

Milton Early Italian, up until now, has shown no disposition to revert back to the parental type, but it must be borne in mind that varieties originating as bud sports occasionally manifest this tendency. In such cases, some of the new growth appearing here and there in the orchard has lost the distinguishing characteristics of the sport and produces fruit that is similar to that produced by the original parent. Reversion does not

usually present a serious problem but, if it occurs, pruning out of the reverted branches is necessary if a uniform stand of the variety is to be maintained. It is important also in cases where reversion occurs that propagation wood used in perpetuating the variety be selected only from trees that are known to be free of reversion.

Notice!

Neither the Department of Horticulture, the Experiment Station, nor the Department of Botany and Plant Pathology at Oregon State College have trees of Milton Early Italian available for distribution. Trees of the variety, however, can be obtained from Oregon tree-fruit nurserymen. Information as to sources of trees and budding wood of the variety can be obtained from the Department of Horticulture, Oregon State College, Corvallis, Oregon.