

How to Find Help Identifying Fruit Trees

Oregon State University Extension Service

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To a homeowner with a tree or two, a long, involved search for a name is of questionable value. If you have enough fruit for marketing, however, those who purchase the fruit may prefer a variety name. This fact sheet tells you how to get assistance in identification of fruit from qualified individuals, but not how to identify fruits yourself. Size of fruit sample and time of picking required for an accurate identification are described.

What is a variety?

Tree fruit horticulturists use the term "variety" to indicate a certain named plant material that is vegetatively propagated, usually by budding or grafting. Every tree of a given variety thus propagated has identical genetic makeup. The characteristics of its fruit may be influenced by weather, climate, and care but are usually nearly identical.

Trees that originated as seedlings of a particular variety are always genetically different from that variety and cannot properly be called by its name. Because genetic makeup occasionally changes, or "mutates," there are "strains" of some popular fruit varieties. These strains are nearly the same as the original but will differ in one or two genetic characteristics. Often it is possible to identify the variety of a fruit but not the exact strain. For example, one might identify an apple as being Delicious but not know if it is Starking Delicious or another of the more than 100 strains of Delicious. For this reason, it is not always possible to tell you how to purchase a nursery tree exactly like the one you want identified, but only one that is nearly the same because it is a strain (mutation or "sport") of the same variety.

How do varieties originate?

Varieties originate either as seedlings or as mutations of existing varieties. They become varieties when they are named and the name is published. Most new varieties are protected by plant patents. Owners sell the right to propagate these varieties to nurseries. It is illegal to propagate patented varieties without paying royalties. Most old varieties, however, are not patented.

What's in a name?

Although most fruit tree varieties have a one-word name, many have names consisting of two or three words. For example, Rome Beauty, which

is often called just Rome, is a famous old apple variety, Ruby Rome Beauty is a limb sport (mutation) of Rome Beauty. In addition, Ruby Rome Beauty has the following synonyms: Black Rome Beauty, Cherry Red Rome Beauty, Miller Ruby Rome, Ruby Red Rome, and Ruby Rome. So the nomenclature of fruit varieties is frequently confused because of the existence of synonyms.

Usually mutations bear the name of the original variety plus an additional descriptive name such as Early Redhaven for an early-maturing mutation of Redhaven peach. Unfortunately, however, new varieties have been named after famous old varieties even when they originated as seedlings and are not closely related to the old variety. For example, Early Italian is not an early-maturing mutant of Italian (synonym Fellenberg) as one might suppose, but is really a new and different variety that originated as a seedling.

Some variety names are descriptive of the growth habit of the variety, such as Starkspur Golden Delicious. This is a spur-type mutant of Golden Delicious, the propagation rights of which belong to Stark Brothers Nurseries. A spur-type apple tree grows more slowly than a non-spur tree and generally blooms more profusely. Examination of the apples will not indicate whether the tree is spur-type or not.

What fruit trees can be identified?

Theoretically, any well-described variety of apricot, cherry, peach, nectarine, plum, fig, pear, or apple can be identified if several well-grown, mature fruit specimens are available. But because few varieties are produced commercially, few are seen regularly by pomologists. Most Extension horticulturists who specialize in fruit production can identify common commercial varieties of fruits. But many non-commercial plantings contain varieties with which the average working pomologist is not familiar. Not all people have the interest or the years of experience required to identify the many different varieties of fruit trees.

Who can identify fruit trees?

Pomologists and fruit-growing avocationists usually are the most capable of identifying fruit varieties. If no such person is available locally and your local Extension Service personnel cannot

identify your fruit, you may send samples to the Horticulture Department, Cordley 2042, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon 97331. If departmental faculty are not able to make an identification, they will refer the samples to a cooperating avocational pomologist.

How many fruit samples are needed?

Bring or send at least five mature fruit samples that are typical in size, shape, and color. They should have stems attached and not be wormy, scabby, or otherwise defective. If the tree bears more than one variety, label the sample with a number that refers to a specific tree or branch on the tree. Package the samples so they will not be damaged in the mail.

What information should accompany the sample?

Your name and address, and, if known, the age of the tree, nursery where purchased, time of maturity of the fruit, and the approximate size and vigor of the tree. List any other characteristics you think might help to identify the sample.

Characteristics that are helpful in identification include: Time of maturity relative to other known varieties; stem length and thickness; shape,

number, and prominence of lenticels; russetting, color, and color pattern; depth, shape, and smoothness of cavity and basin; size, position, and shape of calyx lobes; aroma and flavor; waxiness and presence of bloom; firmness and color of flesh. Usually, only well-grown specimens will have all of these identifying characteristics developed to a degree that is satisfactory to permit identification. Sending poor samples is a waste of time and effort, as identification is difficult if not impossible.

How are varieties identified?

Thousands of fruit varieties are described in old, out-of-print books such as Beach's *The Apples of New York*. In addition, some experts can identify 40 or 50 apple varieties on sight. Also *The Register of New Fruit and Nut Varieties*, by Brooks and Olmo, describes 3,897 varieties. Often, many hours of patient searching, study, and comparison are required. Not infrequently, the specimens cannot be positively identified.

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