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The Roxbury Russet Apple

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The Roxbury Russet apple affectionately and colloquially called the "Roz," in its heyday, was also known by many other names: Reinette Rousse de Boston, Howe's Russet, Marietta Russet, Belfre Russet, Boston Russet, Jusset, Warner Russet, Silvan Russet, Pitman's Russet, Shippens Russet, Ruginetta di Boston and Belper Russet. This list of 12 is a sample of the 41 synonyms listed for this apple in the National Apple Register of the United Kingdom. By any name it was presumably the same apple.

It is not a certainty where this fine cultivar originated. It probably can trace its ancestry to England where Costards, Pippins and Russetins were common names for apple types. In all probability it was a seedling find discovered in the Boston or Roxbury, Massachusetts, area early in the 17th century. As early as 1649 it was taken to Connecticut where it was established and where it had its strongest identification. This date is considered to be the start of the fruit growing

industry of Connecticut. In any event the Roxbury Russet is credited with being the oldest known named apple cultivar in what is now the United States.

From Connecticut, where the Roxbury Russet was considered a connoisseur's cider apple, it moved west to New York and beyond with the advance of the frontier. Israel and Aaron Putnam introduced the cultivar into Ohio in 1776. They obtained scions from their uncle, General Israel Putnam, of Revolutionary war renown, who resided in Pomfert, Connecticut. The Putnam Nursery which they established was the earliest nursery west of the Alleghenies and remained in business until 1821. Another synonym for the "Roz" is "Putnams Russet of Ohio," and in due time it became the dominant cultivar in Ohio. Plantings were also established in Indiana and Michigan about this time.

By 1850 this cultivar had found its way to California. Nurserymen W. H. Nash and R. L. Kilburn, in the Napa Valley, had ordered scions in New

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York and they arrived in California packed in moss after the torturous trip around Cape Horn.

The tree is described as an excellent and heavy producer with a wide degree of adaptability. It is considered to be of moderate vigor having spreading structure and distinctive reddish brown downy shoots.

Although not considered by some as having the highest flavor, it was an exceptionally profitable apple because of its reliability in production, uniformity in sizing and especially in its keeping quality. The Roxbury Russet was an apple that could be relied upon to keep, in a usable condition, through the winter while others shriveled in the cellar. This is a characteristic also found in the Arkansas Black cultivar. Thus, the Roxbury Russet was a special treat when fresh marketed in the spring.

Beyond its storage characteristics, the apple was remarkable for its sugar content. For this reason it had the highest acclaim as a cider apple. It also had a special aromatic flavor of fennel, a trait common in all russet apple types; hence the French named Fenouilletts ascribed to it.

The fruit is medium or large, roundish to oblate and remotely conical; the cavity is acute, the calyx basin round, closed and moderate in size. Stem length is about 2cm long. The skin is variously mentioned as not quite red or green or yellow; but covered with a muted yellow brown or greenish brown russet, hence the name. The skin is thick and tough. The flesh granular, juicy, slightly crisp and sub acid is greenish white.

The ripening date is reported to be January, harvest time must obviously be earlier, possibly early October. In

the warmer climates, it has a tendency to drop its crop early.

With the advent of the newer more flavorful and certainly more eye appealing apple cultivars and the decline in cider as the staple drink, the "Roz" slipped out of the commercial production picture. Stark Brothers did not list it in their catalogue after about 1911. By 1914 they were selling the American Golden Russet which was a mutation or selection from the Roxbury Russet. Though highly fireblight susceptible, it is now considered to be the highest quality cider apple whether as an exclusive or as a blend. The most recent edition to the "Roz" lineage was the discovery in 1969 at Gales Ferry, CT, of a Golden Russet or Roxbury Russet limb mutation. It is identical in all respects to the Golden Russet except that it is a spur type. Starks will market it under the designation Starkspur Golden Russet (Holmberg strain).

Cider is gaining in popularity in the United States and it has become an important adjunct to roadside and pick-your-own marketing schemes. It may well be that the Roxbury Russet and its relatives will once again become cultivars in demand.

At present there are several sources where trees or scions of the old Roxbury Russet may be obtained. The following is a partial list: South Meadow Fruit Gardens, Birmingham, MI; Converse Nursery, Amherst, NH; Henry Leuthardt Nursery E. Moriches, NY; Oregon Historical Gardens, Portland, OR; James Madison University of Harrisonburg, VA; V. Dickinson (Glackens) Conway, NH; Gene Wild Indianapolis, IN; Bountiful Ridge Nursery, Princess Ann. MD; and New York State Agri. Experiment Station, Geneva, NY.