

The Porter and the Dyer Apples

by

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In the praiseworthy interest of what is new and strange and may turn out better than the old and familiar, we have dropped many valuable things, including some fruit varieties that have never been adequately replaced. Among them are two extraordinary apples—so excellent in quality that they stand quite apart from and above most varieties, old or new. I have looked into their history, and cherish the hope that, through the Fruit Gardens Committee of the American Pomological Society, they may yet be brought back into cultivation at least in gardens and home orchards, and be saved from complete extinction.

The Porter Apple

It is difficult to understand the complete eclipse of the Porter apple, a Fall apple without a peer in its season and, some think, with no superior at any season. The tree is hardy, healthy, long-lived, productive, and generally comes into bearing at an early age. It succeeds admirably as a dwarf bush on Malling IX stock. A tree of this variety on Malling IX in my garden has been the best of twelve varieties tried.

The Porter apple is yellow, sometimes with a pinkish blush, and more or less oblong. Although there is some variation in size, most of the fruits are above medium to large. It is when this apple is bitten into that its outstanding virtues become instantly apparent. As it is almost impossible to describe flavors, one can only say that the flesh of the Porter is vinous, luscious, spicy and rich. As a culinary apple it is supreme, retaining its flavor in whatever manner it is cooked, and the fruits hold their shape remarkably well when stewed or baked.

That bible of American kitchens,

"Fanny Farmer's Boston Cooking School Cook Book" used to have much to say about the Porter apple. The 1923 edition of the work includes a recipe for "Canned Porter Apples," and a recommendation that the same apple be used for jelly. But later editions have ceased to mention a fruit no longer available.

The town of Sherborn, Mass., about 15 miles southwest of Boston, can claim the Porter apple for its own—if indeed there is anyone left there who ever heard of it. The story of the discovery of the apple is told by C. M. Hovey in his handsome two-volume work "The Fruits of America" (1851). According to this account, the apple originated on the grounds of the Rev. Samuel Porter "about fifty years ago" (1800) "and remained unnoticed for some years."

Old trees of Porter still exist here and there in northern New England and the old farm homes of New York and perhaps further west. But old people in these regions are often heard to lament the scarcity or absence of the Porter. I have seen Golden Delicious apples unscrupulously palmed off as Porters, which they superficially resemble in the month of October. The subsequent discovery of the fraud must have been sad.

The Porter flourishes in the northern states. In cold summers it ripens somewhat later than in more genial years, but its flavor is unimpaired. The railroad worm apparently does not attack it and the fruit is practically immune to scab.

The Dyer Apple

Whether the Dyer, which ripens here following the Porter, is actually a native of America, or an immigrant from Europe, will perhaps always be a question.

The Dyer apple was first cultivated in this country in Rhode Island, and has been traced back to Revolutionary times. It was then known as Pomme Royale, and the name was not changed to Dyer until early in the 19th Century when the Massachusetts Horticultural Society unfortunately "so named it for Messrs. Dyer of Cranston, R. I., and the gentleman who lately brought this fruit into notice in Mass.," according to William Kenrick in his "New American Orchardist" (1835). This is an obscure explanation in itself, for to how many gentlemen named Dyer does it refer?

A. J. Downing, in the first edition of his "Fruits and Fruit Trees of America" stated that the original Dyer tree was grown in Johnson, Rhode Island, and that Mr. Kenrick had mistaken the Pound Royal or Pomme Royal of Connecticut for the Dyer. In Charles Downing's revision of his brother's book (1857), this statement is corrected as follows: "It is supposed to be of French origin and to have been brought to Rhode Island more than a hundred years ago." He added, "the old and familiar name of Pomme Royale should be preferred."

The undistinguished name of Dyer has clung to this apple to the present day. However, in Illinois it has been known as Pommewater, a name mentioned in Shakespeare. Beach gives at least ten other names under which it has been grown. It is apparent that this apple has in its day been much esteemed and widely grown.

Several apples called Pomme Royale have been grown in France, but why should a French name have been given to this apple if it was American in origin? It could have been so named by French settlers, or in all probability, it was an old French variety of that name brought by these settlers from France to Rhode Island. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, more than 400,000 Huguenots are said to

have fled France. Some of these refugees found their way to Rhode Island in the New World. The apple known as Dyer may very well have accompanied this or later Huguenot migrations.

The writer has sent scions of the Dyer to be grown and fruited in France, where perhaps it will at last be identified.

The Dyer apple would not be worth all that has been written about it here or in the past, were it not for the extraordinary delicacy and finesse of the fruit. It is not a handsome apple, being greenish-yellow in skin color, with a pinkish cheek at times, and is covered with veins and networks of russet, which give it a dull appearance. It is globular and medium to large. But it is the quality of its flesh which places the Dyer among the finest of apple varieties. Too tender, however, to take commercial handling, it has remained a fruit for the amateur.

Let us see what the opinion of pomologists has been through the years, since the Dyer was first brought into notice.

Wm. Kenrick, 1835: "rich, saccharine, subacid and excellent."

C. Downing, 1857: "very sprightly, tender and excellent."

P. Barry, 1883: "one of the best of dessert apples."

S. A. Beach, 1905: "one of the very finest of dessert apples."

U. P. Hedrick, 1938: "The quintessence of the apple orchard."

I have fruited this superlative apple for the last five years on grafts top-worked on a tree of the old Golden Sweet, an excellent apple in itself. The Dyer appears to be even more productive than the Golden Sweet, a heavy bearer.

In spite of the fact that it is not a showy fruit and is unknown to the general public, the few baskets of Dyer offered locally for sale under the provocative name of "Royal Apple of France" have been eagerly bought and have created a demand impossible to fill.