

Exploring northern species

Fruit you can get your teeth into!

by Roger Samson

Sustainable Farming editor Roger Samson spent an afternoon recently with edible landscape advocate and northern fruit pioneer Ken Taylor at his Windmill Point Farm just off the western tip of the island of Montreal. While grafting pear buds onto rootstocks, Taylor talked about his philosophy and experience in these alternate forms of sustainable farming.

What was the driving force for Ken Taylor to get into the business of northern fruits?

Partly it was because I grew up on a farm where I was used to the farm orchard. I can remember cherries and plums and various types of apples and pears and then when I came to the city I found the typical supermarket had only two or three or even one apple offered and you wonder why. It was also the fact that I started being very skeptical of the processed food industry. I was seeing the food that the farmer produced wasn't the same food that was getting to our table. It was being processed beyond recognition and the processing chemicals and the processes themselves were doing things to the food I didn't like. So I wanted to start finding ways of producing my own fruit, berries and nuts in my own backyard. When I began I got into variety collecting as I couldn't go to the local nurseries because they were basically ornamental nurseries and still are today. They specialized in ornamentals; food crops and fruit trees weren't really part of their inventory or knowledge. So it became a new field and still is. I am still learning every year which fruits can make it in northern climates, which ones are disease resistant, which ones are less insect prone, which ones have potential as a commercial crop, which have the best nutrient contents, which are tasty or not. There is a lot of work that needs to be done.

As well, the agricultural system is letting down the farmers. We overproduce Macintosh and import millions of dollars apples, it doesn't make sense. We don't have much of a fruit industry in Canada because traditionally we restricted the fruit growing to the very warm parts of the country - the Niagara fruit belt, the Okanagan and the Annapolis valleys. Now we know that we have the possibility to have an apple orchard in Lac St-Jean or northern Saskatchewan. We know we have the

varieties to do it with and we should be able to do that with all kinds of fruit, nuts and berries.

Your studies in the chemistry field - what were you looking at?

I was looking at the contamination of food, whether it be from the farmer via the use of pesticides or herbicides, or from the processor who added taste enhancers, texturizing chemicals or chemicals to prolong shelf life. I looked at all the chemicals and found out that some of them weren't that good for you, in fact they could kill you. The short term effects are not usually noticeable and that is why their use continues.

Do you think fruit quality has deteriorated?

That goes without saying. Any fruit grown locally is always better. They are growing the plums 3,000 miles away that we are eating here in Quebec, quality has to suffer. There are numerous varieties that can be grown in the province, we should be developing a local plum industry.

Do you think people are suffering nutritionally because of the distance that fruits are being shipped?

The fact that fruits are picked before they are ripe means they have not fully developed all their nutrients and flavour. Vitamin C is possibly the most valuable vitamin being lost. Any fruit starts to lose its vitamin C content the moment it is exposed to heat or air. The whole process of importing your vitamin C from California or Florida just doesn't make sense when you can grow all kinds of fruit and vegetables high in vitamin C right here at home.

What is this material you are grafting here and how did you obtain it?

This is the Ritson Pear, the oldest pear tree in existence in Ontario. Its still alive outside the GM plant in Oshawa. About 10 years ago the Oshawa horticultural society asked me to preserve it for them. I think it is a great tasting pear. In fact, in the Fruits of Ontario Report in 1905 they described the Ritson pear as one of the nicest pears for eating and processing that they ever tested. For 270 years the tree has resisted everything from disease to severe winters and is still productive. The fruit size is reasonable, about the same size as Bartlett. So I brought the Ritson back here and grew it for a few years and now I'm budding it and I'll start selling it. There is no one else selling it. Most of the nurseries don't produce their own trees, they just sell what's available - Bartlett, Clapps, Anjou.

You also have a Ritson plum?

Yes, when I went to get the Ritson pear, I saw a plum tree growing wild near a suburban backyard in the area. I didn't taste it but I brought it home. A few years later it produced fruit. The fruit had an ugly, green mottled colour. But talk about flavour, it's delicious.

What about the disease and insect problems with plums. Do you have any varieties which you consider promising?

I have a selection of a plum I found on an old farm in the Eastern Townships in Quebec called Red Arctic. It is one of the best I find for disease and insect resistance. It has never had black knot on it in the 25 years I have grown it. Obviously the farmer who originally selected it must have noticed this species growing in the wild that had super tasting plums on it and that resisted disease and insects. I also have Black Beauty which is a cross between the Red Arctic wild Canadian plum and the Japanese plum. The Red Arctic is thickly-skinned with a nice red-orange colour and orange flesh that is very sweet. The Black Beauty has a softer skin and flesh from the Japanese plum but is still very hardy. It is a super tasting plum that has phenomenal crops and is precocious. It may have a little more insect damage than the Red Arctic. A tougher skin is a definite deterrent for the plum curculio which is a bad insect for plums. However, most people wouldn't even take notice of the thicker skin on the Red Arctic.

Which apples do you think have the best potential for an organic system?

You can go with some of the newer disease resistant apples, that's a good start: Freedom, Liberty, Brightgold, Nova Easy Grow, Murray, Trent, Prima, Priscilla, Redfree, and William's Pride. Then there are the old fashioned apples that are scab free like the Wolf River, Yellow Transparent, and Wealthy. I would also go with a Russet because of their fine flavour and storability. They are quite disease and insect resistant because of their skin. Just stay away from Macintosh and all its offspring and you have better disease resistance. In fact, all the well known apples shouldn't be planted except perhaps Spartan, which has a certain amount of disease resistance and is a good storage apple. Insects don't really bother me for organic growing because different biocontrol are being developed everyday to help ward off the worst of the insect attacks. It's the disease control that is more difficult.

How do you find most of your plant materials?

When I'm out in nature I'm always watching. For example, for the Red Arctic plum I happened to be down visiting a farm in the Eastern Townships of Quebec and saw an abandoned farmstead. The house was gone and the old orchard had pretty well grown up in wild trees. The old plum tree which had supplied the farm with plums for probably fifty or sixty years was hanging in one corner. The fruit was on the tree at the time and I thought it had merit. So I took a piece of wood and a few years later had fruit in my own backyard.

There is no one set way to get plant materials. Sometimes I plant seed and observe the offspring. Sometimes I find an old tree. Sometimes people will bring me things and I will evaluate it here in the context of the other materials I have. Sometimes old time plant breeders will give me material after they have retired from the university. They get into stuff they like doing after they leave their rigid programs at the university. I get genetic material from all over the world.

However, very little of my material comes from the research being done in the government supported agricultural system. Their criteria is different than mine; anybody that is looking for more offspring from Macintosh is tied into a life of spraying. That's not my idea of fruit growing. Plus I'm also interested in the planet supporting plants, the one's that fix nitrogen, clean the air, provide bird food- that's a whole area that the government hasn't even looked at. The nursery industry hasn't looked at it so its left up to people like myself. There's not many of us looking at those types of plants: such as the Seaberry, Kentucky coffee tree, selections of honey locusts for food, Rosehip vitamin C selections, mulberries, elderberries, bear berries and native plants. There is a need for a lot of development work on them so that they can become food producing native plants instead of just wild animal food.

What about the edible landscape industry. Do you think it is going to take off?

Yes, and I think it will take some pressure off the need for imports. I hope it will also make a more discriminating consumer who would then demand the same quality which could only be met by local farmers. So it might be good from that point of view. It could be the tail wagging the dog. The consumer demanding a better product from the farmer and the agricultural system being a better leader. Right now they don't know. If you've been eating Macintosh apples in February all your life you don't realize there is an option. But there is now. Merchants are bringing in apples from New Zealand and some of these are the same varieties that we could be growing here in Quebec.

If you were to lose your job at the college and go into fruit farming full time, what would you grow?

The pear orchard would be the main crop: all kinds of varieties of Asian and European pears. I'd also have some apples, plums and cherries. I wouldn't touch sweet cherries as they're too difficult. I'd have a diversity of the other fruit, nuts and berries such as Michurin and Northstar sour cherries, and Nanking cherries. If I had lots of time I'd try grapes. They are very labour intensive. I would sell them as table grapes. The only time I would recommend wine making is if you have leftover grapes from the sale of fresh grapes to customers. Wine is very tricky in our climate, it is too risky a venture. Nuts could be planted for the long-term, berries short-term.

A catalogue is available for \$3 from Windmill Point Farm, 2103 boul. Perrot, N.D. Ile Perrot, Quebec, J7V 7P2 (514) 453-9757.

Yes, you can grow fruits in the north! But, can you eat them?

According to Ken Taylor the difficult part is finding northern fruit with taste that you can eat. A chemistry professor with taste buds, his summer laboratory is an edible landscape and northern fruit nursery at Windmill Point Farm and Nursery, Point du Moulin, Quebec. Zone 4B for fruit tree lovers.

Spending time with Ken Taylor in his fruit jungle is an experience in tasting, in fruit culture and all that's wrong with our priorities on this planet. On display on the front lawn are the Dolgo crab apple and the Purple passion apple. Taylor thinks together they would make a wonderful, tasty red cider instead of the usual brown, syrupy stuff.

On the side of the garage there is a large clump of the grape Ventura with leaves that hide numerous bunches of grapes. Then around to the side of the house is a 5 m tall Illinois Everbearing Mulberry.

Throughout the yard tour, Taylor talks about the possibilities for edible landscaping. Immediately behind the house is a 5 m tall Sauvignac European pear tree. The tree is loaded with good sized fruit and has nice clean foliage. Taylor adds to the discourse on northern fruits with some practical application.

"Here, just try that. Now, isn't that a nice, crunchy, sweet flavour, eh?" says Taylor. Tasting is believing as he describes how the tree was discovered by a Father Sauvignac near Quebec City.

Taylor says that choosing an imported European pear for this northern climate is always a question of compromise. "John is even bigger than Sauvignac, and more impressive, but it just doesn't have the flavor," he explains. Even with a chemistry background, taste is what it's all about.

"You can't grow pears if you can't eat them" Taylor says. "The people who grow tasteless, hardy pears must have had their taste buds frozen off by this northern climate."

To demonstrate his point, Taylor turns to some of his early plantings of hardy pears. Selecting a pear from an Olia tree, sold out west as a hardy pear, he offers a second test which turns out to be distasteful to the point of throwing the fruit on the ground.

"Isn't that a beauty. Couldn't you munch into that on a cold evening on the prairies?" Taylor says sarcastically.

In contrast, for the best tasting European pear Taylor selects an Ambrosia tree in another part of the garden. It's his own introduction which came from the seedling of a rootstock.

To complement the lesson on tasting, Taylor looks upward to demonstrate the importance of hardiness. Twenty feet up is a grape vine that has scrambled its way up the side of a tree.

"It just came through one of the toughest winters in twenty years and it has got fruit right at that the top. That's hardy," he says. Taylor has numerous varieties of grapes located throughout the garden - Edelweiss, Worden, St. Croix, Kay Gray, Greento, Big Blue and Vondell - all of which he considers excellent.

Out of the 'jungle' of Windmill Point Farm's edible landscape and onto the laneway leading to the conventionally maintained rootstocks there are various other fruits to be seen. First is the Asian pear which Taylor started working with in 1980. He believes it to be the most promising new fruit for Quebec.

He likes it because the Asian pear has a nice, sweet crisp taste. He lists other desirable qualities such as being precocious (bearing often in the second year), having few disease or pest problems, excellent storability, and a picking time that is not critical. There are several other varieties of Asian pears, with Hayatama having the best fruit form. Of all the fruits, Taylor thinks this has the most commercial potential.

Next on the fruit trail are plums. Several older varieties such as Reine Claude or Green Gage are in view, both of which have been grown for several hundred years in Europe. Taylor shows off President, a large sized plum that can extend the plum season to October.

Then there are the nuts: Buartnuts (a heart nut - butternut cross hardy to Zone 3) and chestnuts. Both trees have beautiful foliage and fruit.

The next field is where Taylor has planted the next generation of fruit trees in order to observe some older plum, cherry and apple trees for their northern potential.

After cursing the raccoons which have raided the orchard and a wild bumble bees nest, the taste experience begins again, this time with the

Sapalta cherry plum. Taylor bites into a plum and a big red streak of juice runs down his chin, establishing that the minimum juiciness standard for this fruit is that it has to be eaten with back hunched over.

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