Suggesting that seedling apple trees have merit for fruit production is like claiming the world is flat. Recognizing the importance of genetic diversity in the global ecosystem, bigger is not always better in regards to fruit quality. Variety (no pun intended) in fruit selection is the spice of culinary life.

As strange as it may seem, we see business opportunities to sell and disperse seedling apple trees to the American garden and countryside. This can bring pleasure to countless people, wild critters and future generations. Opportunities start with our production, and move beyond our nursery gate to retail nurseries, conservation and landscape projects. We will share some background and a few ideas that we hope will catch the attention of those looking for opportunity to do good and make a buck.

Apples, as we Americans eat them, are the result of 4.3 million years of evolution and modern breeding programs. Breeding has imparted great eye appeal, size, color, extended storage capability, but only tolerable taste and culinary appeal. Most modern commercial apples, to quote world famous gastronomic restaurateur Alice Waters, are “Farmer’s . . . quest for the reddest, most visually flawless fruit (that) has led to a flavor-deficient cardboard copy of an apple, . . .”

The origin of the apple is in Central Asia in the Tian Shan Mtns, of modern Kazakhstan. The ancestor of our domesticated apple, Malus domestica, is Malus sieversii. In the past, Lawyer Nursery has imported seed of this historic specie from Kazakhstan. A member of our staff has walked among the trees in the forests where the dominant species is Malus sieversii. These indigenous trees yield fruits varying in size from gum drops to softballs, and in color from green to yellow to red to purple.

The route of edible apples to America came through Europe, although it was the Chinese that invented grafting and true domestication sometime in the second millennium B.C. European varieties in early colonial America didn’t do well and were soon overtaken by seedlings or pippins. These eventually became widely dispersed, reverting to sexual reproduction. In time new varieties such as Newton Pippins, Baldwins, Golden Russets and Jonathans resulted, which were adapted to the conditions of North America. But the most famous varieties that are still with us today are the Red and Golden Delicious and McIntosh. (Granny Smith was discovered in Australia in 1868).

Today, of course, we have modern varieties each with their own specific traits based on where it will be grown and its commercial usage.

We cannot discuss apples without mentioning John Chapman, most famously know as Johnny Appleseed. Chapman’s seedlings sold for 6.5 cents each. Stories and lore about Chapman abound, but it is safe to say he was the earliest nurseryman both famous in his own time and remaining so today.

**Lawyer Has Dispersed More Apple Seed Than Johnny Apple Seed.**

We must mention here, our claim at Lawyer Nursery, that we have dispersed far more apple seed than Johnny Appleseed. Our recent estimate is that in the 50 years since our founding we have either planted or sold at least 15,000 lbs of apple seed. This is enough seed to grow 300,000,000 seedlings. This includes both US sources and imported seed.

There are about 17,000 apple varieties nurtured and named over the last 400 years. In the early 1900’s USDA cataloged over 7,000 named varieties. Since then 85% of these have been “lost” from nursery catalogs, commercial orchards, farmer’s markets and all but a few from the American table.
The fruit quality and size of seedling apples is very diverse due to hetrozygosity or extreme genetic diversity. One mature tree, will in effect, produce several thousand new varieties per year. Commercial growers look on this diversity with disdain, giving a bad rap in America, to the resulting fruit. The fact is we have “lost” one of nature’s most interesting culinary offerings from our diet.

Breeders can demonstrate the capability of producing monster apples, that only one is required to fill a pie. However, size, and visual appeal do not necessarily go hand-in-hand with flavor and texture. In Europe and Central Asia, smaller, more flavorful, and somewhat “wild” apples remain in widespread favor.

We at Lawyer Nursery, with some trepidation, suggest that there are possible business opportunities in the nursery trade in offering apple seedlings for fruit production. We do not remotely suggest that the production would be large scale and commercial. Rather we foresee other contributions to our world and a few brief examples are mentioned below. Nurserymen, landscapers, garden centers, conservationists, and small farmers, all have a business opportunity to capitalize on capturing the public’s interest in the interesting culinary merits. They can also provide environmental rewards, by establishing widely dispersed plantings of seedling apple trees.

**Here are some fresh ideas.**

Garden centers can promote and sell, or give away for promotions, small seedling apple trees. The cost is minimal both to the business and gardener. However, it would be important for the consumer to be informed on the genetic diversity and what this means in terms of expected fruit size, fruit quality and so on.

Landscape designers can consider specifying seedlings for a fruiting apple hedge or a large specimen tree in the appropriate setting, giving natural appeal with both profuse blooms and “wild apples.”

Conservation plantings already do include, in some cases, fruiting apples. However, the plants have usually been selected for cold hardiness, e.g. Malus baccata, for spring blooms rather than the possibility of providing edible fruit for wildlife and people. (At Lawyer Nursery we can attest to the fact that the bears love our apples.)

Think of America’s Blue Highways, parks, urban nature trails, picnic areas, windbreaks, rest stops, fishing access sites, wildlife viewing areas, and so on; all with the occasional seedling apple tree. In some cases it won’t be new, just better planned. An intentionally planted tree is better than one resulting from someone’s apple core being carelessly pitched out of their car’s window.

The accompanying photo (front page) shows the range of fruit size collected from three seedling apple trees naturalized along the public roads between Plains and Lawyer Nursery. As one can see two of the three trees have decent fruit for eating fresh.

Copyright ©June 2012 by Lawyer Nursery, Inc. 6625 Montana Highway 200, Plains, Montana, 59859, USA. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced by any means, nor may it be stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or otherwise copied for public or private use without written permission from the copyright holder.