Autumn Is for Apples

By Susan Camp

"All at once summer collapsed into fall."

Oscar Wilde

A few days ago, a friend posted this quote from Oscar Wilde on her Facebook page. Mr. Wilde's words made perfect sense to me.

We seem to have collapsed into fall during the last two weeks. One day, we were suffering with a relentless sun in cloudless skies and 90°F heat and high humidity, then all of a sudden, evenings and mornings temperatures dropped into the 70s, and we received several days of rain.

Almost overnight, my 'Autumn Damask' rose bloomed for the second time, the leaves on our native dogwoods (Cornus florida) turned blush pink, and my basil plants took on their end-of-season sickly, yellowish hue.

Now, the Autumn Equinox has occurred, and Fall has officially arrived. It's not like we didn't know it was coming. The days have been growing shorter for weeks; it's just that fall seemed to happen early and all at once this year.

This seasonal change isn't a bad thing. We can put on our flannel shirts, light the firepit, and eat s'mores and drink cider, or we can bake apple pies and drink hot chocolate. Either way, apples play a major role in our enjoyment of the fall season, and Virginia plays a significant role in U.S. apple production.

Virginia ranks 6th nationally in commercial apple production with approximately 5 to 6 billion bushels of apples produced annually. Eighty percent of Virginia apples are processed as applesauce, apple butter, apple juice, and cider. Virginia's apple-growing region ranges from the northern Shenandoah Valley south to Patrick and Carroll Counties along the North Carolina border and also includes Albemarle and Rappahannock Counties. Apple production contributes approximately $235 million dollars each year to Virginia's economy.

A growing industry in Virginia is cider production, particularly in the Piedmont. New cideries open every year, and a few have gained national recognition. Hard cider is a fashionable alcoholic drink right now and steadily gaining in popularity. Cider can be produced from commercial apples, including Stayman or Winesap, both grown in Virginia, but some cider producers are touting little known varieties like Sheepnose, Hewes Crab, and Black Twig for superior cider color and flavor

Have you ever wondered why apples from the supermarket don't taste the way you remember they did when you were a child? More than 7500 named cultivars exist, but only a handful are grown commercially, including Red and Golden Delicious, Granny Smith for cooking, Gala, Pink Lady, Fuji, Rome, and Honeycrisp. These cultivars and a few others are bred for disease

and insect resistance, color, shape, texture, and shipping and storing longevity. Please note that I didn't mention taste. Commercial apples are bred for sweetness and low acidity, rather than unique flavor.

In modern times, even apples face trending, so that the desire for Red Delicious and Gala apples is waning, and Ginger Gold, Envy, and Cosmic Crisp are among the newer cultivars we may begin seeing at the grocery store.

With all of the new cultivars debuting on the market, are any of the older varieties being grown? Most of them aren't, and some have been lost, but there has been a resurgence of interest in heirloom or vintage varieties for several years. Some growers are offering limited quantities of renewed heirloom cultivars at farmers' markets, roadside fruit stands, and county and state fairs.

Many of the vintage apples are grown organically. They may not be the picture-perfect, red, yellow, or pink apples seen in trendy cooking and decorating magazines. Heirloom varieties often are oddly misshapen with russet spots and bumpy skin. With vintage apples, it is all about the flavor and the nostalgia for times gone by.

Coastal Virginia isn't the ideal place to grow apples, but the Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley aren't far away, and fall is the ideal time for an apple-picking weekend.

Go to Virginia Apples at apples.net for "Apple Fun Facts" and color photos of apple cultivars grown commercially in Virginia.