



Open Orchard Project Fact Sheet

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CUTTINGS

OLD ORCHARD TREES

Some of the older trees around Southland and NZ are over 100 years old and the best way to save them is to start some new young trees of the same variety. You can usually tell how old the orchard is by the date when the first house was built on the property as people usually put in their fruit trees in at the same time.

If you have access to records about the orchard from family archives or from an elderly neighbour it is important to write this down to help identify the tree and also to know which ones are valuable. It may look old and diseased now but for 80 years it may have been the best cooking apple in the district- a new young graft on fresh rootstock will start again being healthy and productive.

Draw a map of where the trees or orchards are - which road it is nearby or a grid reference. This helps us know which varieties do best in which area and will help us locate them again.

TAKING CUTTINGS

Scion wood is the proper name of the cuttings we take from the newest growth on an old apple or pear tree. This has the genetic history of that variety of tree and it can be joined (grafted) on to a new young apple or pear tree rootstock.

Safety First

Don't start scaling an old fruit tree without thoughtful observation and preparation. Have someone with you and use a ladder if needed - some old branches look sound but can break off without warning with your unexpected weight- and in July when you gather the scion wood the branches are very slippery.

Best thing is to choose more smaller cuttings from the lower level rather than risking a climb for one or two longer ones. Sterilize your tools between trees with methylated spirits or similar so you don't spread disease.

Directions

You are looking for this year's growth- the nice young wood growing out of the end of established branches. They will end smoothly tapering to a new young bud.

If it has rings and bends of any form usually show where last year's wood begins - sometimes it is less than a centimetre from the branch end. Ideally you need 2 or 3 pieces of at least 30 cm long. Sometimes you may only get some 5cm cuttings and then it is best to cut it off into the second year growth the make it long enough so be able to store without it drying out. (The second year wood is discarded at grafting time).

If the tree has not got much new growth you can cut back a few youngest branches and next year it will send up some new young shoots for you.

It does take some time to find the suitable wood and then it is good to have another person directing the cutter as they tend to disappear again when looked at from another angle. Don't take cuttings from around the trunk, they are most likely the root stock.

Don't take cuttings from skinny upright branches that grow suddenly out of a much larger branch - these 'water shoots' as they are known as they are not suitable for grafting material.

Tie together and number each set of cuttings, marking it on your 'map' straight away- it is too easy to get them mixed up! If the young growth or buds are diseased don't take cuttings from them- have a look to see if another large branch has healthy tips.



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Storage

As soon as you get home wrap your named cuttings in damp newspaper then in plastic. Then unless you have used vivid pen and plant tags, rename them again on the outside. Keep them in dark storage less than 4 degrees- e.g. in your fridge until grafting time Sept/Oct.

Wild and new seedlings

Roadside or rail wayside apple trees are ungrafted and unnamed as they are grown from pips of the discarded fruit. However out of every 100 'wildling' apple trees two or three will be wonderful new varieties that can be named and shared around by grafting (all known apples once started as a seedling that was worth keeping).

If you had the space and time you could plant our 100's of apple pips and wait for several years until they mature and you may get 5 or 6 new good varieties suitable for Southland from them. Apples spend 7-15 years in a juvenile stage where they are immature and very spikey so you have to be patient. Many will never fruit, others will be crab apples, others may be sickly, Others may be simply uninteresting and not tasty.

Similarly for pears. You will also get a few new and wonderful ones that you can name and share. Plums can grow from cuttings if you don't mind what size tree you get. Stone fruit can be grown from their stones. Apricots do especially well in Southland but we don't see old ones around as their life span is much shorter than pip fruit.