

MUSEUM ORCHARD

The inspiring story of James McCannell and his apple tree collection.

Pat Kerr



Although most apple enthusiasts wouldn't have heard of it, 99-year-old James McCannell holds a remarkable piece of Canadian apple history and biodiversity in what he calls his "Museum Orchard." Over the past three decades, McCannell has preserved several varieties of apples that were originally planted in the Canadian Centennial Museum Orchard at the Vineland Research Centre.

The Centennial Orchard was established in 1967. In the 1980s, the orchard was closed, possibly due to funding cuts. When he heard of the potential loss, McCannell, who had personal connections to the researchers, obtained plant propagation material and started his own private orchard behind the pool on his property.

Some years after the Centennial Orchard's closure, scientists who recognized what they had lost visited McCannell for some propagation samples. They collected 60 slips from his trees, which they used to help start the smaller Heritage Orchard in 1988. The oldest Canadian apple in the current collection, known as 'Snow' or 'Fameuse', traces its lineage back to 1636. Other samples from the original Centennial Orchard were sent to the New York State Agriculture Experimental Station, which has been designated the National Depository for Apples in the US.

The Centennial Orchard had 194 apple cultivars, while the Heritage Orchard has 85. According to a spokesperson, the Heritage Orchard “preserves varieties no longer in commercial production to maintain apple germplasm that may be used for future production.” Propagation material from the orchard is available to commercial nurseries. The Orchard continues to be located at the Vineland Research Centre in Niagara peninsula, where temperatures rarely go below -18°C even in mid-winter.

McCannell, however, has focused on preserving the varieties from the Centennial orchard that he and his late-wife loved for their flavour and unique qualities. You won’t see cultivars like McIntosh or Golden Delicious that are common in our supermarkets on his property. McCannell smiles as he talks about his wife and reminisces about her cooking triumphs. “She was a great canner and preserver,” he says. “She would go to all the farmer’s markets

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looking for Hyslop crabapples. When a friend found the trees, I set the grafts and she checked them every day for fruit.”

McCannell lives in Port McNicoll, just outside Midland on Georgian Bay, where temperatures can fall to -30°C. Because of this, his Museum Orchard preserves apple trees that are cold hardy. These include the original Spy (not the Northern Spy that is widely available), Old Time Russet, Hyslop crab, Shanga, Christopher Reed (a Russian apple) and the Alexander (beautiful large

apples). Some of the wild trees McCannell used as rootstock have up to 20 cultivars grafted onto them. McCannell continues to add to his collection, and some of the grafts were done as recently as March 2015.

Of the 50 original cuttings that he received, McCannell says he got 49 successful grafts. He honed his grafting skills at orchards his family owned in Collingwood, which are ski trails today. Whenever his health allows, he is happy to assist others start their own heritage orchards. “Doctors all want to be farmers





these days,” he reflects, “And farmers want to get off the land.” He tells me about two local dentists who recently asked for his help in starting heritage orchards on their properties just north of Barrie.

As is the case in many arboretums and orchards, the tags on some of the trees on McCannell’s property are falling off. However, a remarkable feature of his orchard is the existence of meticulous drawings of the layout of the orchard and location of each cultivar. McCannell was a mining engineer, and his belief in exacting details and documentation has spilled over into the way he manages the orchard as well.

Despite this, it is becoming harder for McCannell to manage the trees. As we wander through the orchard, he points out the “railroad worm,” scab and other issues that have cropped up this summer. The trees did not get sprayed this year. He lost his groundskeeper, and with his wife gone, McCannell is losing interest in the trees he so carefully tended for decades. He has found someone to mow the lawns, but he shrugs when he thinks of the pruning he would like to see done. “I haven’t been down here in a month,” he says.

One of the trees McCannell recently had to cut down had 17 varieties grafted on to it. He tells me about the Ben Davis apple, which also died this year. “It was a famous export apple. They were picked in November and you could bite into them in February.”

He points to another variety: “This is Chenango. It is the last in existence, an early apple. I call it sheep’s nose.” The US version of Chenango is listed as a medium-sized, mid-season apple with a hint of strawberry flavour that was discovered in the 1800’s. Its lineage is unknown.

Every tree in McCannell’s orchard, including other fruit trees, has a story. “This is a Persian plum – I call it Italian plum,” he tells me, pointing to a tree. “There was a delegation from Sudan, I collected the seed from them. It is the only plum that comes true from seed and you preserve it without sugar.” He also had a couple of pear trees. “One was spring killed,” he says. “I don’t even try to grow them now.”

In her book *Heritage Orchards*, Susan Lundy observes that “Commercial orchards have little interest in old cultivars.” Unfortunately, this seems to be true for McCannell’s orchard, as well as his home and property. His professional life and family history are colourful and historically significant. His is the oldest house in the area that is still owned by the original family, and holds remarkable stonework from his 30 years in international mining. There is some talk (but sadly no action) on turning his heritage home into a museum when he can no longer care for it. There is information generally available about his family’s contributions to the CPR, mining and Great Lake shipping, but nothing about his work with trees. The

municipality has little knowledge about the orchard. McCannell had planned to leave the property to his nephew, but he died a year ago. “I don’t know what is going to happen,” he tells me.

Two mature trees – a white ash and black ash – are the property’s focal point. So far, they have remained safe from the pervasive emerald ash borer, but that may change with time. McCannell knows his orchard is about as safe from developers as the ash trees are from the borer. “Don’t take too long coming back,” he says, as he waves us off. “I might not be here much longer.” Despite his words, I leave inspired by the fact that McCannell is full of ideas for future planting and grafting, and smile to myself as I notice that he planted a new dwarf cherry tree just earlier this year. 🍷

Pat Kerr is a Northern Ontario gardener and tree grower, who specializes in writing about urban and rural tree care, and won honorary membership in the International Society of Arboriculture in 2011.

Watercolour images on pages 12 and 13 are from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Pomological Watercolor Collection. Rare and Special Collections, National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, MD 20705 at <http://usdawatercolors.nal.usda.gov>.

The list of apple varieties being grown at the Heritage Orchard at the Vineland Research Station (page 13) is from www.plant.uoguelph.ca/people-and-places/research-sites/heritage-orchard.



Alexander

Fameuse

Rambo

Apple varieties at the HERITAGE ORCHARD

Alexander (Emperor Alexander)	Delicious (Original type)	Idared	Milwaukee	Scarlet Pippin
Antonovka	Delicious	Irish Peach	Moscow Pear	Seek-no-Further
Baldwin	- Bisbee	Jerseymac	Mutsu (See Crispin)	Smoothie
Baxter	- Imperial	Jonagold	Northern Spy	Spartan
Ben Davis	- Millerspur	Jonathan	North Star	Spitzenburg (Esopus)
Blenheim (Blenheim Pippin)	- Starking	Joyce	Northwest Greening	Stark
Blue Pearmain	Duchess	Kentish Fillbasket	Ontario	Sweet Bough
Bottle Greening	Early Harvest	King (Tompkins King)	Pomme Grise	Tolman Sweet
Cabashea	Fallwater	Lady (Api)	Primate	Twenty Ounce (Cayuga Red Streak)
Canada Baldwin	Fameuse (Snow)	Lobo	Princess Louise	Tydemans Red
Canada Red	Folwell	Lodi	Quinte	Vista Bella
Chenango	Gala	Macoun	Rambo	Wagener
Colvert	Gano	Maiden Blush	Red Astrachan	Wealthy
Cortland	Golden Russet	Mann (Deiltz)	Red Atlas	Wealthy Double Red
Cox's Orange Pippin	Goodland	Margaret Pratt	Rescue	Winter Banana
Cranberry Pippin	Granny Smith	McIntosh (Parent)	Rhode Island Greening	Wolf River
Crispin	Gravenstein	McIntosh	Ribston (Ribston Pippin)	Yellow Bellflower
	Grimes	- Blackmac	Rome	Yellow Transparent
	Haas (Fall Queen)	- Macspur	Roxbury	York Imperial
	Hubbardston	- Marshall	St. Lawrence	
	Hume	- Summerland		
		- McMahon		