

THE ORGANIC APPLE ACTIVIST

ONE MAN'S PURSUIT OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORCHARDS

BY KC WRIGHT
PHOTOS BY BARRY WRIGHT

Driving up to Michael Phillips' organic apple orchard in Groveton, New Hampshire, it begins to make complete sense that his property is on Lost Nation Road. Hidden away in the state's mountain country, the small farm sits deep in the woods off of Route 3, midway between Littleton and Colebrook in Coos County. And after meeting Phillips and learning some about his endless pursuit to produce the most flavorful and healthy organic apples within the dynamics of the ecosystem, it's also understandable that his grove is named **Lost Nation Orchard**. It's not an orchard frequented by many, nor will it ever be. But it's a destination, and a jewel at that.

It's only been in the past hundred years or so that apple growers conformed to chemical methods of orcharding. Today, many orchardists and experts believe that it's impossible to grow organic apples. The dichotomy here lies within the commercial realities of today's economy: the constant dedication and intense labor required to produce a successful organic crop can stress a small farm to the max. In return, an organic apple farmer needs to charge close to \$2.00 a pound for select organic apples. This is a good bargain though when you consider the benefits to a community that a working orchard brings and the healthy food it provides. Phillips believes that the future of sustainable agriculture lies in the hands of people willing to invest in local skills and resources.

Some consider Phillips to be an unorthodox apple grower by today's standards. In fact, there are very few orchardists around the country who are successfully harvesting good organic fruit by implementing age old practices along with methods gleaned from current integrated pest management (IPM) research. Phillips is passionate about producing an organic crop of apples using holistic methods in an ever-evolving climate. He recognizes that those who have failed in their efforts to grow apples free of chemicals were following old school organic methods, basically substituting less effective natural materials for chemical ones. Phillips explains that what is truly necessary for producing apples without chemicals is

building tree health and microbe connections, that is, working beyond an artillery of spraying. He believes that how an apple is grown determines how well it tastes.

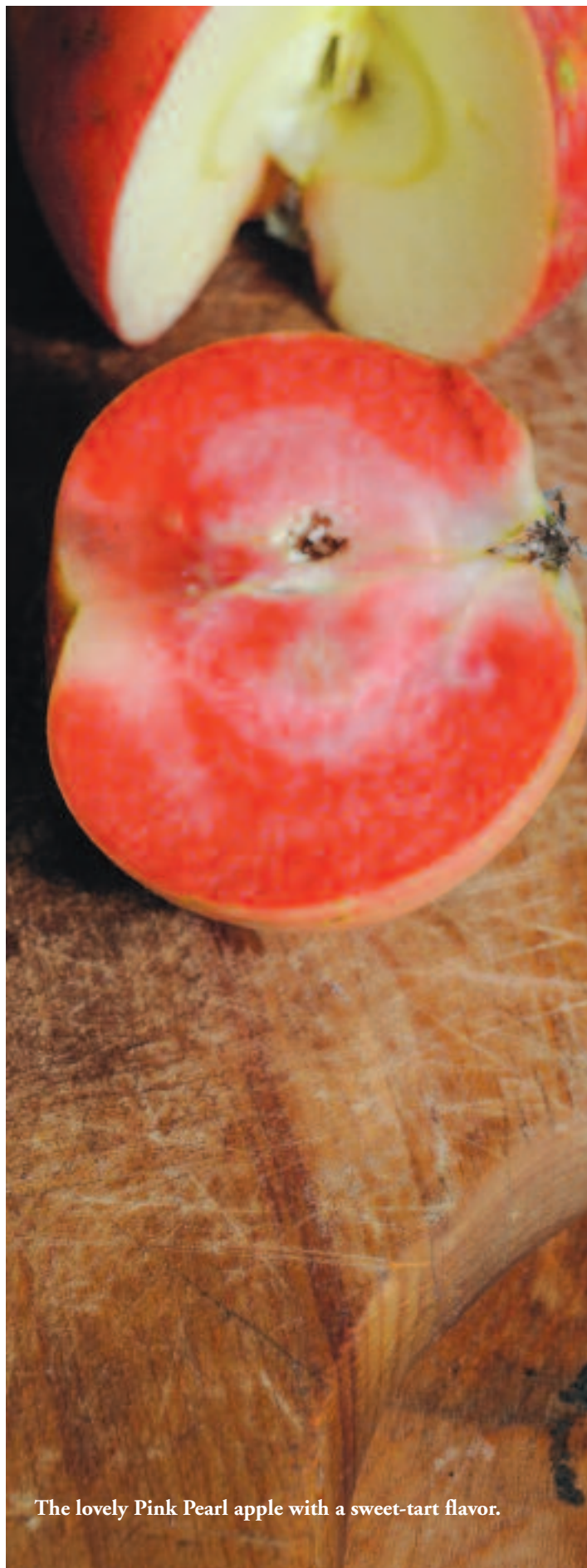
Phillips likes to say that he retired at the age of 23 from a career in civil engineering after getting fed up sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic en route to work in Washington D.C. Thinking that there was a better place to watch the sun rise, he moved north and began crafting holistic approaches and methods to grow healthy fruit. Several decades later, Phillips finds that working with ecosystem dynamics, encouraging biodiversity, and the challenges of pests and disease is more satisfying than relying on sprays, natural or not, thus his growing practices go beyond organic.

The mountains surrounding Lost Nation have an influence on spring arrival as well as pollination. He watches for the behavior of honeybees and blue orchard bees, hoping they are true to their mission. He uses fermented teas of nettle and comfrey, pure neem oil (sourced from tropical evergreens), kaolin clay, liquid fish and friendly microorganisms that he believes enhances the flavor of his fruit. He gleans herbal insights from his wife Nancy, a noted herbalist on their **Heartsong Farm** where Lost Nation Orchard resides. All this work hinges on patient investment year after year.

Yet these are not consistent nor fool-proof methods. One of the challenges of climate change is the far more erratic weather. Spring brings optimism, but the spring of 2010 was a wicked season for many apple growers around New England. The mid-May freeze, after an early April bloom, left many orchards without much of a harvest. Lost Nation's yield is only about 10-20% of the usual crop. Ironically, according to Phillips, the fruit that did survive is both large and beautiful (if only ten or so apples to a single tree). Ever looking on the bright side, he says that producing little fruit this year allows the trees some rest, so that they will likely return with a

Michael Phillips picking his organic apples during a good harvest.





The lovely Pink Pearl apple with a sweet-tart flavor.

vigorous bloom next year, and the potential for a “fantastic” crop – so long as the weather cooperates.

In a good year though, a generous harvest season will fill Phillips’ post and beam barn with 60-some varieties of apples. Lost Nation is not a pick-your-own orchard, rather customers are invited on fall weekends to select tree-ripened fruits as they come ready. It’s a real treat to choose from these apples along with a few pear varieties grown here, the reward for making the trip, which in itself is a nice way to spend an autumn day.

Phillips works to preserve heritage varieties of apples, and encourages people to appreciate these lesser-known varieties. There’s the lovely Pink Pearl, seemingly too pretty to eat, as well as Gravenstein, Redfree, William’s Pride, Zestar, and the venerable Duchess of Oldenburg which Phillips rates among the top five pie apples. A cutting board and knife are always on hand in the apple barn. When Phillips offers up a slice of a heritage apple, people typically react with surprising pleasure.

A few years ago, Phillips was recognized by Slow Food USA for helping to preserve apples in danger of extinction. He extends his community orcharding efforts with grassroots networking, offering an online newsletter for growers keen on holistic methods and heritage varieties. Each June he holds an annual orcharding class, Organic Apple Intensive, to inspire apple lovers to pursue their orchard dreams with practical insights. His book, *The Apple Grower, A Guide for the Organic Orchardist*, first appeared in 1998, and was revised and expanded a few years ago. With over 25,000 copies in circulation, Phillips’ book is helping people grow healthy fruit for their communities and rebuild their enthusiasm for heirloom varieties.

It has taken years to learn the nuances of an ecosystem approach to orcharding. Phillips keeps a nursery full of rootstock readily available to budding and veteran orchardists alike. Highly sought out for consultations and speaking events, Phillips now shares his experiences to help new growers accelerate along their own learning curves. There are plans to resurrect the former Lost Nation Cider Mill, which was closed over a decade ago when federal regulations interfered due to fears about *E. coli* in unpasteurized cider. The effort will ultimately be community-based with the cider available only to shareholders.

Phillips will be the first to tell you that being flexible is a requisite farmer’s mantra. Despite the immense challenges, it is possible to grow healthy, flavorful apples with little or no synthetic chemicals. Phillips continues to achieve this by combining the forgotten wisdom of our ancestors with the best research knowledge and techniques of today. Every orchard is unique, but Lost Nation and Michael Phillips are priceless. *ewm*

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