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Getting a taste for tradition

Apples are the most popular fruit in Switzerland. But there's a lot more to the humble fruit than your average supermarket Golden Delicious.

Switzerland has more than 600 - largely forgotten - traditional varieties of its own.

David Szalatnay at the Agroscope agricultural research station in Wädenswil on Lake Zurich has been tracking down and cataloguing old fruit varieties. He has found an estimated 2,000 types in Switzerland alone, of which around a third are apples.

The country's varied climate and the fact that Swiss mercenary soldiers brought back new kinds from France and Britain are all reasons for small Switzerland's apple abundance, says Szalatnay. Cold-loving Russian sorts were even introduced in the mountains.

"A lot of the old varieties were grown for processing purposes, for fruit juice, liquor or dried fruit, but many of these apple trees have been cut down to make way for farming machinery and for urban expansion.

Tastes have also changed. Nowadays people like crispy apples which are quite firm and sweet. In former days people preferred them with more acidity," said Szalatnay.

This is why you won't see many traditional varieties in the shops. At present, one in three apples sold in Switzerland is a Golden Delicious. Only two native Swiss apples, Maigold and Rubinette, make the top ten and both come from the 1960s.

The project to find and describe the traditional apples is not easy. Some apples can be identified through old books - the Sternapi, named for its five point star shape, is beautifully illustrated in a 400-year-old reference tome in Agroscope's library. The fruit is actually thought to be much older than that, dating from Roman times.

However, finding the correct name is not always easy, as the same fruit might be called up to 15 different things across the country. DNA testing has helped.

The four-year project, which runs until 2010, is also looking to see if traditional apples can better cope with fire blight. This devastating bacterial infection kills trees, turning their leaves and branches black.

Thousands of trees were cut down in Switzerland in 2007, the worst ever year for fire blight, and it is still spreading.

At Agroscope, the research part of the agricultural office, specially grown baby trees are injected with fire blight under indoor quarantine conditions.

Resistance - meaning less susceptibility - has been confirmed in several old varieties, including the cider-friendly Heimenhofer and the Schneiderapfel.

But there are no immune sorts. Even the tree collections at Wädenswil, in which two trees per variety are grown for conservation and observation purposes, have not totally escaped. Luckily, Agroscope has many planting stations around the country, so there is no risk of a variety being wiped out.

Szalatnay finds his pomological research very rewarding. "You can see that there are not just 15 apple varieties, but there is a huge range and some have very special qualities which have been forgotten or are only found in old books," he said.

Contrary to popular belief, an apple tree cannot be grown from a single seed. Normally the tissues from one plant are encouraged to fuse with another. One plant is selected for its roots (stock) and the other for its fruit (scion). The two are grafted together, i.e. a shoot of the scion is cut off and placed onto a prepared area of the stock. This is a 2,000-year-old method.

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