ONE TO WATCH

The apple whisperer

Matthew Sutton spreads the gospel of sustainable orchard keeping along California’s Central Coast.

What advice can you offer someone just starting out? Do your homework. You need to choose a variety of fruit that will grow well in your area and pick the right site for planting. The soil needs to be amended. I see so many mistakes, like when people on the Central Coast plant apricots without realizing they only get a crop every four years here. Also, remember fruit trees aren’t ornamental bushes. You can’t just hack them back and expect them to continue fruiting—you need a reason for every cut you make.

What’s new in the world of apple trees? The whole backyard food movement has caused a huge resurgence of heritage apple varieties. It’s similar to how heirloom tomatoes came on the scene and blew everyone away. People are moving away from Granny Smith and Fuji, and are looking to grow apples that might not look perfect, but taste absolutely amazing.

How’d you get started in orchard keeping? I’d been growing vegetables for a few years, but fruit trees are a more permanent crop, and that really resonated with me. I realized I can develop a long-term relationship with an orchard, rather than the typical 60 to 80 days I’d devote to annual veggies. And being on a ladder up in a tree really beats having to squat down all day.—INTERVIEW BY JENNIKA SILVER

Plant this now

With apple green foliage that turns yellow to amber in autumn, the new Spiraea japonica “Tracy” is one of our favorite new shrubs, showy in mixed borders and containers. And it practically takes care of itself. Just plant, feed once, in early spring, and forget it. After the fall show, you can expect rose-caramel leaves in spring, followed by clusters of large, bubblegum pink flowers in summer. Visit monrovia.com for nurseries that carry Monrovia plants.