

Cox's Orange Pippin Tribe Offers Growers a Delicious Challenge

Here are some descriptive terms typically ascribed to the flavors and qualities of Cox's Orange Pippin apple –

One of the finest-flavored apples ever grown . . . Aromatic . . . Highly flavored . . . Intense . . . Deliciously sweet . . . Enticingly sweet . . . Rich, intense, aromatic flavor . . . Spicy, honeyed, nutty . . . Pear like . . . Subtle blend of great complexity . . . Richest in flavor . . . Unsurpassed in tender juiciness . . . Taste lingers on the tongue like ice cream . . . Outstanding blend of sugars and acids . . . Unsurpassed in the tender juiciness of its yellow flesh . . . The greatest apple of this age . . . All characteristics so admirably balanced as to please the palate and nose as no other apple can do . . . An excellent keeper . . .

All of that praise notwithstanding, it is also one of the more difficult apples ever grown—definitely not grower friendly!

Cox's Orange Pippin was originally planted as a “pip”^{*} of the sharper and more strongly flavored Ribston Pippin by retired brewer and horticulturist Richard Cox in Buckinghamshire, England in the 1820s. Owing to its small size and intense flavor, it was elected the best 19th century dessert apple. By the 1890s, Cox's Orange Pippin was the leader in English apple sales. But by the early 1900s it had fallen from grace, due to its extreme and extensive problems with disease. It was resurrected by the 1920s with the advent of lime-sulfur sprays to control fungal problems. Its fame persists to the present day, not only in England, but in Holland, Germany, Belgium and New Zealand. That this variety has remained popular for several hundred years despite its demerits—including small size, dull color, cracking and splitting, susceptibility to scab, mildew, and bark canker, scion weakness, and the changing criteria for marketplace apples—is a testament to its outstanding taste.

Cox's is a small apple, oblate in shape (i.e., slightly flattened at the poles) with an unassuming dull color—a weak orange-red flush over a greenish-yellow background with patches of small dots and russetting over the top half of the fruit.

As per taste and texture, it is aromatic, even perfumed, with an intense flavor range: spicy, rich, honeyed, with a hint of nuttiness. The flesh is coarse and chunky, sometimes evoking pear-like qualities. The blend and complexity of sugars and acids give it an unsurpassed tender juiciness that lingers on the tongue.

^{*}Pippin was a term used in 18th and 19th century England to describe apples with excellent characteristics. A pip refers to the small nature of the apple seed. It probably derives from the French word *petit* (small).

The demerits of Cox's Orange Pippin go on almost endlessly: it cracks and splits, especially in cool, wet, gray spring and early summer weather (think England, Santa Cruz, and the Pacific Northwest west of the Cascades). The first time I observed this phenomenon, I thought someone had gone through the tree with a knife and slit every fruit once, twice, three times. The stem basket is deep and collects a lot of water, and russets (netted veination) to the point of cracking. This syndrome is most pronounced in the first 5–6 years of fruiting and then only in wretched springs. pH levels lower than 7.0 also contribute to the problem. Lime is the remedy. Mildew also weakens the tips of the shoots, causing die back. Heat, high sunlight levels, and humidity are anathema to Cox's, inducing sunburn, bark burn, and turning it to mush.

The scion is weak, arguably the weakest of all scions. And yet the fruit load is consistent and heavy. This results in a tree that needs constant prodding to grow vegetatively. Nitrogen is the tool of choice to remedy this malaise. However, too much nitrogen markedly diminishes the crisp, chunky nature of the taste treat that is Cox's Orange Pippin.

It is also subject to papery bark disease, a devastating syndrome wherein the bark exfoliates (beautiful on Sierran granite, not so on apple trees) for no other reason than you decided to reside along the coast.

Cox's is also a basitonic tree, often wider than tall. This growth habit makes the development of a central leader and an upper whorl of scaffold branches frustrating if not fruitless. On weak rootstocks (< M26) most of the Cox's tribe tend to be productive bushes (4–5 feet tall) that can be spaced intensively (3–4 feet apart).

Cox's Orange Pippin's eating intrigue begets a loyal, almost cult-like following and tastes that are to die for. It is both precocious (bearing at an early age) and promiscuous (it will mate and breed with almost anything *Malus*). Thus the list of chance-occurring seedlings and intentional breeding products is extensive and delicious.

Cox's Orange Pippin Offspring

Fiesta – The latest, best-behaved, and thus most marketable of all Cox scions is virtually crack, scab and mildew immune. The fruit can be twice as big as the original, with a slightly rounded shape. The color is 75–80% red over a green-yellow background and quite pretty. It has a good deal of the full Cox's flavor but is a bit more sprightly and juicy. Easier to sell and almost as good to eat. Ripens late August—mid September.

Alkemene – A Cox's Orange cross from Germany. It as the same sweet-tart flavor as Cox's but is more lively, rich

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and honeyed. A popular commercial variety in both Germany and Holland. Rivals Cox's for lack of tree vigor.

Holstein – Thought to be an open-pollinated seedling of Cox's Orange Pippin out of Hamburg, Germany (1918). Holstein is a bit like a Cox's pumped up on performance enhancers. The base color of the fruit is a deep yellow overlaid by an orange-gold flush with some russetting. It is pollen sterile and thus often sets a shy (light) crop. The texture is even more coarse and chunky (this is a good thing) than Cox's. The flesh is a creamy yellow with lots of juice and an aromatic flavor similar to Cox's but bigger, bolder and sharper (acidity). It ripens in September.

Queen Cox – A whole tree mutation discovered in Berkshire, England in the early 1950s. It is a bigger, cleaner, prettier Cox's. It appears to be self fruitful, that is, it can accept pollen from itself, making it a sure bet to set fruit even under wretched weather conditions when the sun doesn't shine, bees don't fly and pollen doesn't flow. The tree itself is even weaker than the standard Cox's.

Suncrisp – A relatively recent introduction (10 years) from Rutgers University. A Cox's x Golden Delicious cross that is cleaner, bigger and more conical in shape than either parent. It possesses an impressive aromatic sugar/acid blend. The tree is very dwarf and not spreading, thus further slowing tree development. It is a reliable and heavy cropper. Ripens late August–mid September.

Russet Beauty – A seedling of Cox's Orange Pippin and Golden Russet. It has all the high flavor of Cox with an insane amount of sugar (gets watery and soft if not picked promptly). The texture is firm if picked at perfection. Tree is spreading with good vigor. This is often a favorite amongst the apprentice group and thus disappears from the Chadwick Garden's trees with great alacrity.

RubINETTE – Another Cox's Orange Pippin x Golden Delicious cross raised in Switzerland (synonym is Rafzubin) in the 1960s. Dwarf, spreading, basitonic tree bears small fruit with light, dull red striping over a yellow background, slightly russeted. Despite its recent vintage, it has the looks and taste of an old time variety. Taste is nutty and sweet with aroma.

Karmijn de Sonnaville – A 1949 cross between Cox's Orange Pippin and Jonathan or Belle de Boskoop from the Netherlands. The intensely flavored, rich, even sharp blend of sugars and acids will overwhelm the entry-level apple eater—they should be dispatched to look for a sugary sweet Fuji, leaving the Karmijn tasting to more sophisticated palettes. The tree is strong and spreading but sets a shy crop 2 out of 3 years. It is at least as, or more subject to cracking and splitting than Cox's and subject to pre-harvest drop in warmer regions. The flavor mellows somewhat after about a month in storage.

Kidd's Orange Red – Bred by amateur breeder and fruit farmer J. H. Kidd of Greytown, Wairarapa, New Zealand. A typical "amateur" (amore = Latin for love of)

effort of triumphant passion that crossed Cox's Orange Pippin with the useless Red Delicious in 1924. Breeding a single successful variety in a lifetime is an accomplishment. Kidd also bred Gala ten years later and Freyburg in 1939. Not bad stats for a 15-year stretch; definitely a hall of fame candidate. The apple is bigger than Cox's and shaped like the Red Delicious (conical) with yellow skin that is flushed orange. It tolerates warm climates better than Cox's. The flavor is a rich blend of sugar and acids with the aroma of violets—wow!

Freyburg – Named for a governor general of New Zealand. A small, dull golden reinette (russeted) type apple. It is a cross between Cox's Orange Pippin and Golden Delicious (aren't they all?) George Delbard, famous French nurseryman, waxes poetic re: this variety: "A veritable cocktail of flavors with the merest hint of anise and producing a juice that resembles the taste of apple, pear and banana." Moderate tree vigor and very upright. Ripens late August–mid September. Raintree Nursery* is about the only source of trees in the U.S.

Cherry Cox – Just like Cox's Orange Pippin with a cherry-red blush and matching flavor. Discovered as a seedling or mutation of Cox's Orange in Denmark in 1942.

And a Variety in Search of a Name . . .

A variety that is starting to resemble Odysseus's 10 years of trials, travels, travails and condemned wandering before arriving home safe again in Ithaca, is alternately called Pinova, Corail, Sonata, and rumored to be renamed again, this time Piñata. This variety was first released in 1986 from the Pilnitz, Germany fruit breeding station. Its parentage is distinctive: Golden Delicious, Cox's Orange Pippin and Dutchess of Oldenburg (an older European pie apple), accounting for both sweet and tangy taste sensations. The apple is crisp, rich and aromatic. The look is a thing of great beauty, with a glowing blush of pinkish red over a solid orange-yellow background. The fruit is medium sized with a slightly conical shape, not unlike Golden Delicious. The flavor combinations make it a distinctive eating experience.

The tree is of low vigor: on M7 rootstock it is only 5'–6' tall; M106 or M111 gives it a boost to 7'–10'. It thrives in cool coastal areas where the color is enhanced and it is virtually scab resistant. In addition to the constant name changes, it is very similar in both appearance and taste to Gala, Honeycrisp, Suncrisp, Sunrise, etc. (although the eating experience is superior to all these varieties). I fear it will never catch on with consumers due to lack of name recognition. Too bad (for them). It is easy to buy and grow on your own. Perhaps it can be shepherded through the rocky straits of Sylla and Charybdis . . .

– Orin Martin

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