
New Hampshire
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Apple Quality: How to Pick the Best

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When buying apples, consumers are sometimes puzzled by how to choose high quality fruit. Fruit quality selection involves several considerations. A prime quality factor is maturity. A “mature” apple is one that has reached the stage of development on the tree where it has achieved its peak flavor potential. Once mature, the fruit is capable of ripening fully after harvest. Apple growers try to pick their crop at a time that maximizes both flavor and storability of the fruit.

Color is one, but not the only indicator of maturity. Some varieties of apples, like McIntosh, turn partially red as they near maturity. The amount and intensity of red color on “Macs” and similar varieties, is the result of sunlight exposure and fall weather conditions. Other varieties, known as “red sports,” such as Red Delicious, are red throughout the growing season so color is less of an indication of maturity. Green or yellow varieties will never turn red but some varieties may develop a “blush” - a tinge of red, yellow or orange as they reach full maturity. Striped or partially red varieties have what is known as background color. This background color will change from deep green to a softer green and eventually to a yellow tone as ripening progresses.

Size is not a true indicator of quality in apples. It is claimed that big or small apples have the same number of cells, the difference is that those individual cells are simply bigger in a large apple. Smaller apples will tend to be firmer than a larger apple from the same tree. Old-time New England growers used the term “thrifty apples” to describe those smaller, firmer apples that used to be preferred for bagged apples. Today, the market prefers larger apples and growers have responded to market demands by altering their cultural practices to produce bigger fruit.

Superficial skin defects are the result of insect, disease and physical damage. Apple growers usually are able to prevent insect and disease damage by conscientious monitoring and treatment. Some defects, such as hail damage are unavoidable due to weather conditions. Bruising can be limited by careful handling. External defects for the most part are only skin deep and do not influence the apples inner eating quality.

Flavor is always the most important consideration when buying fresh fruit. Each apple variety has distinct flavor and texture characteristics, ranging from tart to sweet, firm to soft, and fine grained to coarse grained. Some varieties have special flavor attributes described as spicy, nut-like, tangy, or aromatic. Local orchards will often have samples available for tasting. The world of apples is one of variety—one worth exploring.

For more information on this topic and others, contact the Division of Regulatory Services, NH Dept. of Agriculture, and Markets & Food at tel. (603) 271-3685, registrations@agr.nh.gov or visit the website at www.agriculture.nh.gov.