

year, as it seems by all accounts that 2016 could well go down as the Year of the Apple.

"It's certainly looking that way," says Danny Rasmussen, produce manager at the Astoria Co-op Grocery, which plans, as always, to stock as many fresh Northwest apples as it can, grown as close to home as it can get them.

"Crop apples are beginning to hit the market now — a couple weeks earlier than usual — and they're looking and tasting great," he says, adding that he's hoping for at least 10 to 12 more varieties throughout the season, most of them a bit beyond the norm.

"We love to bring in those specialty fruits, the ones you don't see everywhere. This year we'll be looking for Gravensteins, Cripps and Ginger Golds, with an eye to a few more that are suited for specific uses," like Rasmussen's own favorite, the purple-fleshed Pink Pearl, which he adores for applesauce, along with Cortlands and Jonagolds, as soon as pie-baking season rolls around.

But no matter what novel pome finds its way to his supply, he's sure the overriding taste preference in his fair city will remain steadfast: The apple of Astoria's eye, according to Rasmussen, is "definitely the Honeycrisp."

A rising star among apples, the Honeycrisp, like most other varieties, has benefitted this year from exceptionally good weather east of the Cascades, with plenty of rain, lots of warm days to produce colorful, sweet fruit, and a balance of cool nights to bring

about that lively tartness.

But upriver orchards haven't been the only apples to benefit: All along the coast, similar weather patterns have backyard apple trees brimming with fruit, getting neighbors gabbing about their favorite recipes and happily dispelling a long-held local assumption.

"A lot of people think that apples can't be grown on the coast, but that's not exactly right," says Raymond Millner, co-owner of The Planter Box, a nursery and garden center on Washington's Long Beach Peninsula. "They need some extra care and a little attention, like all fruit trees, but they really can do just fine."

His family-owned nursery stocks and sells more than 20 varieties of apple, some of them specifically developed to withstand our unique growing conditions, like the Wynoochee Early and the Chehalis — two beautiful cultivars that don't shy away from fog or fungus.

"It helps to know what you have," says Millner, adding that special varieties need special things. "Once you know what your apple wants, you're on your way to success."

So what are the biggest mistakes people make with their trees? According to Millner, poor pruning ranks number one. "You need to prune in the fall, not the dead of winter, preferably before the last leaves hit the ground," he says. "Remember: Pick your fruit then prune your apple, always with a goal of creating a canopy of fruit-bearing branches."

"We can't have a bumper crop every year," Millner says,

acknowledging that this year is special. "But if you always take care of your tree, you'll be ready when those rare seasons come your way."

Ready or not, this year's extravaganza is already underway, and whether you're picking them from the shelves of your local market or the branches of your very own tree, you'll need a plan if you want to maximize your apple assets. Here's a breakdown on a few varieties you're likely to find, including flavor profiles as well the best ways to enjoy them. Happy harvest!

Braeburn: Marvelously sweet and best enjoyed fresh, though it does make a decent pie; its tender skin smells like just-pressed cider.

Cameo: An all-around dandy, perfect on a cheese plate or for dessert. The Washington Apple Commission gives it an excellent rating for

applesauce, pies or snacking.

Cortland: Resistant to browning, this apple is great in salads or on a tray that needs to last at the table. Also good for applesauce and drying.

Fuji: A great keeper, this flavorful giant can last weeks in the fruit basket without getting mealy. Okay for baking.

Gala: Eat it now! Not a good baker, but perfect for lunches and snacks.

Granny Smith: Named for a real woman, this is a good apple for use in savory dishes or alongside grilled meats (like pork or chicken). It's invigorating tartness sets it apart.

Gravenstein: Aromatic and flavorful — a first choice for sauces and pies. (Use them quick, though, they don't last long.)

Honeycrisp: True to its name in flavor and texture; a nice touch in applesauce and unbeatable eaten fresh.

Have an unknown apple tree in your backyard? The very thorough quiz at apple.name.com can help identify it.

It takes 36 apples to make one gallon of cider.



Raymond Millner, co-owner of The Planter Box, a nursery and garden center in Long Beach, Washington, stands beside a Wynoochee Early apple tree — a variety that does well in our coastal climate.



LOLA'S SUPER EASY APPLE CRISP

This simple crisp is only lightly sweetened, allowing the true flavors of the apples to show off nicely; the cranberries lend an extra Northwest touch and a hint of color. As a dessert, it's amazing served with a bit of caramel sauce and ice cream. Or, skip that extra sugar, and it works great for breakfast, too.

Bonus: It can easily be made gluten-free (substitute almond meal for flour) or even vegan (trade the butter for coconut oil).

Ingredients

- 1 cup old-fashioned oats
- 1/2 cup flour
- 1/2 cup chopped pecans or walnuts (optional)
- 1 1/2 teaspoons cinnamon, divided
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup maple syrup
- 1/4 cup melted butter
- 4 large apples, peeled, cored and chopped (5 to 6 cups)
- 1/4 cup dried cranberries
- 1/4 cup orange liqueur (or juice)

Directions

Preheat oven to 350 F.

In a mixing bowl, toss together the oats, flour, nuts, 1/2 teaspoon of cinnamon, and salt. Add the maple syrup and melted butter. Mix until combined. Set aside.

In a small sauce pan, add dried cranberries to orange liqueur and warm over low heat until berries plump slightly.

In a separate bowl, lightly toss the apples with the rehydrated cranberries (juice too) and the remaining 1 teaspoon of cinnamon. Spread in a greased 8-by-8-inch pan, then sprinkle the oat mixture evenly over the top.

Bake for 35 to 45 minutes or until golden and crisp, with apples at the desired tenderness. Serve immediately or let cool and refrigerate up to three days.

(Recipe adapted from gimmesomeoven.com)

"Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." — Martin Luther



More than 2,500 varieties of apples are grown in the U.S., but only a handful make it to the supermarket every year. If you're looking for something special, try a local farmers market or, better yet, grow a tree of your own.