

Sterling Apples

To the core, Sterling's reputation as an apple town has deep roots. It's a long story worthy of a book, but let's press it down to a few snapshots.

This town has stood tall in Massachusetts for possessing the finest soils and slopes for the cultivation of apples, a fruit purported to rank third in the world for production and consumption. In turn the highest producing apple region in New England has historically been Worcester County.

The USA stands second only to China as a top- ranking producer of apples (4.7 million metric tons annually to China's 47 million metric tons). Poland is a close third. American apples are principally grown in Washington State and in the Northeast (New York/New England). When it comes to apples, Sterling is on the map!

Sterling's 250- year history as an agricultural town begins long before commercial orchards but not before the ubiquitous presence of apple trees. Virtually every farm had a few trees for domestic use, perhaps most importantly for keeping barrels of cider in the root cellar. This beverage was universal before the age of beers and ales. Cider was king. But it was not a significant cash crop among the overall sources of farm income.

The dawn of the twentieth century saw this change. For Sterling, the arrival of the Sterling Cider Mill in 1911 brought new opportunity. The mill would take advantage of the adjacent train depot, the new arrival of municipal electric power, and the surrounding hills, then proving their exceptional ability to produce fine apple crops. This small town was poised to enjoy a new rural prosperity. The commercial orchards here, by and large, were established at about this time, delivering thousands of bushels to be processed into vinegars, juices, butters, and byproducts.

Before WWII, orchards were stocked with "standard" trees – the large old trees standing tall and wide and requiring long tapered apple ladders to harvest. An acre supported about 40 trees. Today most all growers use "semi-dwarf" and "dwarf" trees grafted onto specially developed rootstock. They are shorter and more easily worked while giving high per acre yields picked off anywhere from 170 to 400 trees per acre.

Back to the orchards of old, we learn that yields varied wildly depending on numerous factors but can safely scribble on the back of an apple bag that the average standard tree - *average meaning some were young (10 bushels a season), and some were fully mature (up to scores of bushels a season)* – would fill 20 bushel boxes.

Side note: You won't guess the two top apple varieties demanded by consumers in 1900. They were the Baldwin and the Rhode Island Greening. If you see them, try them. They are

among the innumerable heirloom varieties that supermarkets ignore but enthusiastic niche growers offer.

Just how robust was the Sterling apple trade? We have little information to rely on for determining the full extent of orchards and cumulative yields during the first half of the century, though, absent more research, we know it was extensive. The hills were draped with beautiful collages of orchards, tilled fields, and pastures (for dairy farms also continued to share the landscape).

In 1961 the Sterling Planning Board made a map entitled EXISTING LAND USE. It shows the roads, dwellings, property lot lines, and for the purposes of this article, acreage devoted to *“Intensive agriculture and orchards”*. This is useful in getting a handle on the extent of commercial orchard operations mid- century. Allowing for the map’s large scale and character of the stippling use to represent orchards, we can approximate acreages within acceptable margins.

Another side note: in 1961, there were 595 households sheltering a population of 3,193 people. Today we have 3,285 households occupied by 8,111 residents. In 1830, the count was 256 dwellings and a population of 1,789. Our housing and population numbers are burgeoning. Farmland depletion is a discouraging result.

The orchard numbers then and now: The 1961 data show approximately 30 commercial growers with cumulative acreages devoted to apple production totaling close to 880 acres (4.4% of the town’s area). The average orchard size was about 30 acres. Today, Sterling has approximately 244 acres still in orchard production – a drop, mostly due to housing development and market shifts, of 636 acres, or about a 72% loss of productive orchard land. The remaining active orchards, accounting for 1% of the town’s area, rest in the hands of five owner/operators. May they live long and prosper.

We can take a stab at the size of the town’s collective crop back when the industry was truly giving this community its rural reputation as a premier apple producing place. Returning to our back of the bag math could shed some light. If the 880 acres of orchard in 1961 was stocked with trees at 40 per acre, then we sported some 35,000 trees. If an assumed average yield per tree – all things considered – was 20 bushels, then the haul was something like 700,000 bushels. Hard to imagine, so let’s say 10 bushels per tree and ponder a yield on the low side of 350,000 bushels. It’s likely a number somewhere in between. A bushel is 42 pounds of fruit. A bushel will press between 6 and 8 gallons of cider. With a bushel a baker can make about a dozen pies. You can take that math further on your own if you wish.

Sterling, in brief that’s our apple story.

