

# Mason County man has visions of hazelnuts in West Virginia's future

Any first-time visitor to West Virginia is likely to notice our abundance of hills and trees. West Virginia is third in the nation in the percentage of forest cover. Made up largely of deciduous, nut-producing trees, the Mountain State's forests provide habitat and food for a wide variety of wildlife.

But as much as squirrel and deer love a good crop of acorns, most people aren't that fond of the flavor.

But one man has a vision for trees that produce nuts favored by human consumers.

His name is John Kelsey and his (current) passion is hazelnuts.

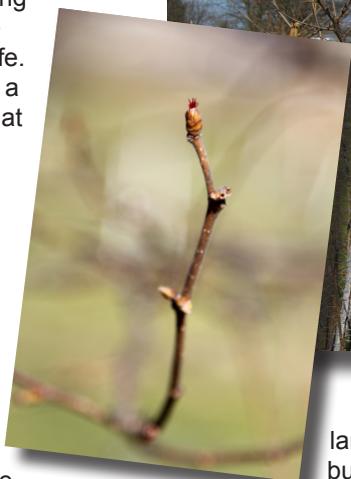
"When I retired ... I wanted to grow something. I didn't have too many years left, so I looked for a tree that would start producing quickly," he said.

Chestnuts and hazelnuts were the two primary candidates, both of which have their pluses and their minuses.

The west coast has been the leader in the U.S. hazelnut industry because for many years it was free of the Eastern Filbert Blight (EFB) that plagued the commercial European hazelnut species in the eastern U.S. EFB finally appeared in west coast trees, prompting the development of more resistant types of hazelnut trees and reducing the competitive advantage enjoyed by the industry there.

Kelsey started out with about 30 different cultivars. A retired engineer who also crafts exquisite wooden rocking chairs, Kelsey's approach to growing different varieties of hazelnut trees demonstrates a depth of research and a penchant for scientific rigor. His detailed, color-coded spreadsheets are packed with detailed numbers and personal notes.

"If you read the descriptions in the catalog they're all great, but it turns out that there's only two or three I'd really recommend," Kelsey noted with a grin.



"I know they'll do great on the same land that will grow 200 bushels of corn, but that's probably not available, so you're looking at little corners. I don't know about steep slopes. I don't know about hilltops. I've had some luck on pretty soggy soil with a little bit of contour. I think that there's a lot of potential sites in West Virginia."

Kelsey would like to see more people involved with hazelnuts in West Virginia. Although he never envisioned his project as more than a test plot to analyze the best breeds to use in West Virginia's conditions, he realizes that it will take widespread involvement to develop an actual market for hazelnut production in the Mountain State.

"I know that it's way to your advantage to get more people into it. This isn't something that you need to keep under a bushel. It isn't going to work until we have markets and you need to have a lot of people involved," Kelsey said.

Until then, Kelsey continues with research, which can result in as much suffering as reward. The "winners" from previous trials have yielded very poor



results this year. Those results might very well be attributable to weather or other conditions over the past year. Kelsey continues to examine to possible causes.

Like many other agricultural pursuits, Kelsey noted that trying to build an industry from scratch is not for the faint of heart.

"To make a commercial enterprise, things really have to be solid. It takes deep pockets and several years to get this thing started, and there's no income, so you have to get as much risk out of it as you can," he said.

Kelsey's work will surely reduce the risk for those that follow him, and he said he is happy to share his research. He can be contacted via email at [jfknutz@gmail.com](mailto:jfknutz@gmail.com).

## Roots of the WV Apple Industry

*Derek Richard, WVDA Fruit and Vegetable Inspection Program Supervisor*

West Virginia has a long and storied agricultural history, but one would hard-pressed to find one more historical than the fruit industry. It can be traced back to its beginnings in the early 1800's when John Chapman, commonly known as Johnny Appleseed, and his brother planted several apple nurseries near Wellsburg, WV. Commercial production continued to increase throughout the 1800's to the point that shipments of apples were being floated down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, some going as far as New Orleans. This continued until the beginning of the Civil War which prevented further shipments and the industry soon began to decrease.

While the Civil War was the primary reason for the failure of the apple industry in the Northern Panhandle, it was also the leading factor for its growth in the Eastern Panhandle. W.S. Miller, dubbed by many as the "Father of the Apple Industry," planted his first orchard in Gerrardstown in 1851. At the beginning of the Civil War, Mr. Miller had a large amount of nursery stock, but the market dwindled. As a result, Mr. Miller continued to expand his own permanent orchard. By the end of the war Mr. Miller had several thousand peach trees and a few hundred apple trees. From this point on the industry expanded locally and continued into the surrounding counties of Jefferson, Morgan, Hampshire and Mineral.

West Virginia is also the home of two commercial apple varieties. The Grimes Golden was found around 1805 near Wellsburg on the property of Thomas Grimes. It is believed it grew from a seed planted by Johnny Appleseed. In 1912 the original

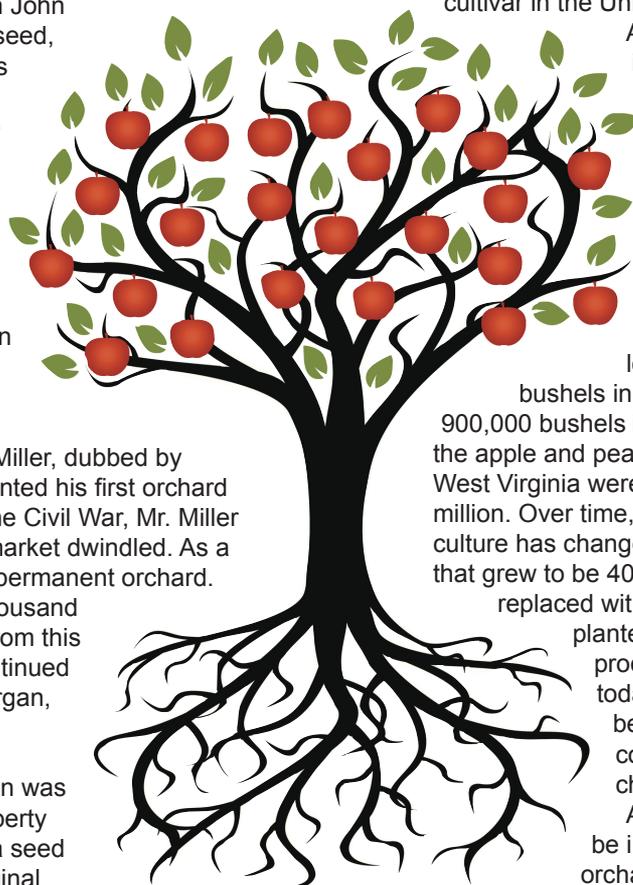
Golden Delicious was discovered near Porter's Creek in Clay County. It is believed to be an offspring of the Grimes Golden. The Golden Delicious soon reached high acclaim and became the leading cultivar in the United States.

Apple production in our state has fluctuated from a low of 1.5 million bushels in 2010 to a high of over 12 million bushels in 1931. Peach production has varied from a low of 150,000

bushels in 2000 to a high of 900,000 bushels in 1954. In 2013, the apple and peach industries in West Virginia were valued at \$17.9 million. Over time, the industry culture has changed. Standard trees that grew to be 40 feet tall have been

replaced with semi-dwarf and dwarf trees. This allows for more trees to be planted per acre and makes management and harvest easier. In early production, many orchards focused on commercial varieties, where today many are more diversified and have newer varieties that have better characteristics and quality to go directly from the farm to the consumer. Many orchardists are also planting other tree fruits like cherries, apricots, and plums.

Ask for West Virginia grown apples at your local market. You will be impressed with the fresh and crisp quality that only Mountain State orchards can provide. Take a bite out of West Virginia history.



**A good harvest yields apples for pies, fritters, and apple cores to feed the critters. Berkeley County, West Virginia, 1910.**