



RIPE FOR THE PICKING



HERITAGE FRUIT TREES AND AN ARBORETUM IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN BASALT

BY TODD HARTLEY

YOU ARE BIKING ALONG a trail through the Emma Open Space and in your peripheral vision catch a flash glimpse of a lone wild apple tree laden with fruit nestled among the willow and scrub oak. At first it seems out of place, but then a little farther along your ride you see another one. Soon your pedaling brings you to the one-time apple orchard by the Emma Store site and a few remaining century-old trees. It dawns on you: "I wonder how many wild fruit trees there are around here?"

As it turns out, there are a lot more fruit trees in the area than you might think.

Vanessa Harmony, owner and operator of Colorado Edible Orchard, says regarding the number of feral fruit trees in the Basalt region: "For our region and climate, it is impressive. Especially considering that a lot of them have been abandoned. They've just had to naturalize."

"We have dozens and dozens of heritage fruit trees that we've located around the valley and propagated — new, cloned trees — at the Permaculture Institute," adds local architect Michael Thompson, co-founder of the now defunct Basalt-based Heritage Fruit Tree Project.



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The Permaculture Institute — officially the Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute, (CRMPI) — made it its mission to preserve the genetic material of the valley's numerous heritage fruit trees, those left over from bygone orchards or growing wild through happenstance, at its campus and nursery in the hills above Basalt. It is a mantle that has been taken up by Harmony, a former CRMPI hand, at Colorado Edible Orchard, which has a nursery in Spring Valley near Glenwood Springs.

"I would like to keep that fruit-growing heritage alive," says Harmony. "Even though we live in the mountains, there's no reason why we can't grow fruit, and we're here, so we should."

Like food-focused treasure hunters, Harmony, Thompson, CRMPI-founder Jerome Osentowski and a handful of dedicated others have scoured the Roaring Fork Valley looking for all the fruit trees they could find to gather scion wood (new growth) to graft onto rootstock. Through their efforts they have been able to preserve some of Basalt's fruit-growing heritage, which dates back to the "quiet years" of the early 1900s.

Those efforts have also made them experts on where and when to pick wild fruit in the valley, and they have some recommendations — in addition to respecting private property and not falling out of trees — for anyone looking for a free, juicy snack that is as fresh and all-natural as it gets.



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"I'd start at the edible garden at Ponderosa Park," says Chris Beiser, Basalt's town arborist, horticulturist and gardener. "That's the whole point of that. Collect what you want from there."

The edible garden, near the roundabout leading into town, is part of the 90 gardens and 168 species of trees and shrubs that make up the Basalt Midland Arboretum. Contained within the town's parks, open spaces and right of ways, the Basalt Midland Arboretum is accredited as a level II arboretum by ArbNet, meaning it contains more than 100 species, offers enhanced public and educational programming, and has a documented organizational or master plan.



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An espalier apple tree in the edible garden at Ponderosa Park. The term "espalier" refers to the practice for training trees onto trellises, or in this case, a fence.

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Once you have sampled the fare at Ponderosa Park and learned the types of fruit-bearing trees and shrubs in the area, it is time to venture out for wilder game. Single cherry trees, though exceedingly rare, bear fruit in July and can be found in Holland Hills, Southside and along a path near Basalt Elementary School. For apricots, take a walk through Historic Downtown Basalt up toward the intersection of Cedar Drive and Pinon Drive in mid-August.

"There are a lot of apricot trees on the hillside above downtown Basalt," says Thompson. "The Luchsinger family, which homesteaded in the area back in the 1860s, owned the hillside and subdivided it, selling lots to people working on the train. Christine Luchsinger, the matron of the family, imported numerous kinds of fruit trees and distributed them to people buying the lots, so many of these trees are 100 to 120 years old."

Learn more about the Luchsingers on the **Basalt Historic Walking Tour**. See map insert for details.

Plums are usually ready to pick around late September, and there are a few publicly accessible trees found on the hillside above Basalt. Both red and yellow plum trees can be found (along with myriad apricot and apple trees) at the U.S. Forest Service El Jebel parcels adjacent to Crown Mountain Park. They are not easily spotted, so they require more hunting than the other trees.

For apples, which typically ripen into peak flavor in October, the Emma Store site and the Emma Schoolhouse on the other side of Highway 82 both have publicly accessible trees. A ride along the Rio Grande Trail in that area could bear particularly tasty fruit.

"There's a tree there we discovered that we call 'Emma's Gold,'" says Thompson. "It's tucked in among a bunch of cottonwoods, and it's by far the best apple we've found in the valley in terms of its size, juiciness and crunchiness. It's only a short throw from the trail."

Let your hunt for wild fruit begin, and if you happen to stumble across a tree that you think no one else has found yet, give Harmony a call so the tree's heritage can live on. 📞



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