



## Johnny Appleseed • Backyard Wisdom

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It's Thanksgiving and time for apple pie and all good things to eat. So we think about Johnny Appleseed, a real American Folk hero who changed the kind of Apples we eat. Did you know that **the apples we eat do not come from trees grown from seeds?** In nature all species are kept healthy by sexual reproduction which insures genetic diversity to withstand a variety of challenges, from climate change to disease attacks.

For centuries orchardists have watched for fruit that is large, disease resistant and flavorful. When they find particularly good fruit the only way to reproduce it is asexually, using grafting. This is because seeds contain completely new genetic combinations from the parent tree. So apple seeds produce mostly what are referred to as "spitters", apples that are too bitter for anything but making hard cider.

John Chapman was an American frontiersman, born during the revolution. At that time all apples came from European grafts. Johnny believed every American could grow their own fruit. He was also a self proclaimed "New Christian" a follower of the 17th century theologian, Emmanuel Swedenborg who taught that salvation doesn't come from the old churches, but by living a life of sacrifice, loving and serving your neighbor.

Johnny was called crazy by many and no doubt he was different. He preceded the rush of settlers going west and acquired property, (according to frontier law) by planting 50 trees on the land. He took free seeds from cider mills, planted his land, returning occasionally to sell the trees to new settlers. Johnny Appleseed, (as he was known by settlers in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) had money enough to live a comfortable life. He owned 1,200 acres of productive orchards scattered throughout 100,000 square miles of the midwest. Still, he spurned the materialistic life saying that his sacrifices earned him a heavenly reward.

In payment for his trees he took food, used clothing, or nothing at all because he felt that every person should own a tree. He wore no shoes even in the coldest weather. He slept outside in make shift lean-to's. He lived off the land, never killing animals, accepting hospitality in Indian as well as settlers' homes. Along with his trees he brought Swedenborgian literature and preaching. Is there a dark side to this ascetic life? Johnny had to know that **his Apples were used only for making alcohol.** Maybe that's what kept his bare feet warm at night.

But how did Johnny's seeds change the Apples that we eat today? In his book *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan explains "Chapman was responsible for the unique combination of genetics that made our hardy American Apple. By planting seeds instead of grafts Johnny created conditions for apples to combine with native Crabapples and adapt and thrive in the New World." So the next time you bite into a crispy apple, thank Johnny Appleseed.



Photos by Lesley Bruce Smith