



## Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

**Plant a bit of history!**

Tree crop cultivation began in our area when John Wolfskill settled near Winters in 1842.

From the Vacaville Reporter<sup>1</sup>:

“The Solano County Herald, on Aug. 23, 1856, said about his efforts: “We are indebted to Messrs. Wolskill (sic) of the Putah (creek), for some of the finest specimens of fruit we have seen for many a long day. Grapes, peaches, pears, and figs are raised by them in abundance, and all of the finest quality. No pains are spared by Mr. Wolfskill in the culture of his fruit, and we are glad that his labor has been so amply rewarded. We hope to see the day that our valleys, in this vicinity, will be one great fruit garden; and to this end, none have contributed more zealously than these pioneers of the fruit business.”

Wolfskill’s heirs donated 100 acres of his ranch to UC Davis.

*The Vacaville Early Fruit District*, written by E.J. Wickson, was published in 1888.<sup>2</sup>

Wickson wrote late-19th century books about California horticulture and farming, helped select the site of the UC Davis campus, and worked in the UC system for over three decades. Wickson Hall on the UC Davis campus is named for him, as is the Wickson plum, bred by his friend Luther Burbank.

Per his history, the first fruit orchards were planted in the Vacaville Early Fruit District in the 1850s. Early local farmers, who struggled with wheat due to volatile prices and the capricious nature of our rainfall, turned to fruit crops. The unique climate yielded early harvests of very high-quality fruit. Fruit could be shipped by rail, and, according to Mr. Wickson, his book is written for “the people in New Orleans, St. Louis, Chicago, New York, Boston and elsewhere, who have paid a dollar a pound for California cherries in April, or who in 1887 ate nearly 2,000 car-loads of California peaches, pears, plums, apricots and grapes....”

The early orchardists also planted walnuts and almonds.

### **Ever wondered where a new fruit or nut variety comes from?**

Starting in the 1870s, a farmer named A. T. Hatch began growing almonds from seed. These were seedlings from a bitter almond tree, but some had sweet kernels. From 2500 seedling trees, he selected the best and began grafting them onto the other seedlings to create an orchard of uniform quality.

“The new varieties,” Mr. Wickson quotes Mr. Hatch, “that are worthy of all praise, are the ‘I X L,’ ‘Ne Plus Ultra,’ ‘Nonpareil’ and ‘El Supremo.’”

150 years later, Nonpareil is still the most widely planted almond variety in California at about 40% of the state’s total almond acreage.

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<sup>1</sup> (Peaches occupy a sweet slice of history, by [Sabine Goerke-Shrode](#), Aug 27 2006):

<sup>2</sup> <https://dn790008.ca.archive.org/0/items/vacaearlyfr1888ejwi/vacaearlyfr1888ejwi.pdf>



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The long-term success of the Nonpareil almond notwithstanding, other fruit and nut varieties have come and gone in the orchard industry. Some that were selected for flavor and size have been replaced in commercial orchards with varieties that are firmer, have better shelf life, turn color earlier in the ripening process, or ripen earlier in the season.

### **What happens to the older types?**

They fall out of the orchard trade, but often remain available for backyard growers from nurseries and specialty growers. They may be lovingly conserved by home gardeners, shared in groups such as the California Rare Fruit Growers who host scion exchanges (sharing budwood for you to graft onto rootstock of your own).

Some organizations educate the public about these heirloom varieties. A group called Slow Food USA maintains the Ark of Taste for American “delicious and distinctive foods facing extinction.” California fruit varieties in the Ark of Taste include some names that are familiar to local gardeners and are very well adapted to our region:

### **Apple: Gravenstein**

This variety came to us from the Russians, who first planted it in Sonoma County in 1811. The famous apple from the Sebastopol region, Gravenstein ripens in July, which is very early. It has unique aroma and excellent flavor. There are several reasons it's not widely grown as a commercial apple. It doesn't keep well, so it's very seasonal. The short stems make it a hassle to harvest. The flavor is tart, and the texture is slightly mealy (one of the best varieties for applesauce). But it is very well adapted to wine country and does reasonably well in the Sacramento Valley. It does require a pollenizer, which can be Fuji or Gala.

### **Apricot: Blenheim**

This was the mainstay of the Winters-area apricot orchards for decades. The unique early ripening in that area made it a very profitable fruit for shipping. Blenheim blooms very early, with the almonds, so winter rains can reduce yields.

Blenheim ripens in early June here. This is a big advantage in the Sacramento Valley, as it means you can pick the fruit before our main summer heat. Apricots are very susceptible to pit burn, a physiological injury to the fruit that is caused by high temperatures when the fruit is softening. Later-ripening varieties are likelier to get that problem.

It's very important to learn when to harvest Blenheim. The fruit should still be slightly green and firm when you pick it. It softens very quickly.

There are many apricots that look prettier, but none that taste better. In fact, most don't taste nearly as good as a Blenheim. Blenheim apricot trees are readily available.

### **Peaches:**

Fay Elberta. The Elberta peach was introduced in Georgia in 1870 and quickly became very popular for the large size and exceptional flavor, and it was firm enough to use for canning and baking as well as fresh eating. It became one of the most-planted commercial varieties in California. Natural variants (called “sports”) have occurred on the trees over the decades, including Fay Elberta which simply ripens a bit later (early August vs late July).



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**Rio Oso Gem.** This peach originated, most likely, as a seedling of a popular cling peach ('cling' varieties are peaches grown for canning). Rio Oso Gem has the firm texture and rich flavor of cling peaches but is freestone. The fruit is very large, the tree is relatively small, and it ripens late – mid-August here. It also has exceptionally showy flowers. One of the best late peaches, and still readily available.

**Suncrest.** Immortalized in the book *Epitaph for A Peach* by David Mas Masumoto, about his grandfather's peach orchard. He laments the loss of the Suncrest peach from the orchard trade. This variety is a relative newcomer, introduced in Fresno in 1959. It has large, very firm fruit with excellent flavor. Thanks to his book, nursery growers have resumed production for the home garden market though supplies are limited. Harvest is late July.

### Plums

**Inca.** I planted this beautiful golden-yellow plum variety a few years ago when the trees became available again, and it has rapidly become our favorite Japanese plum variety. Golden skin and flesh, tangy-sweet, great texture, with harvest over 2 to 3 weeks in August. Luther Burbank introduced it in 1919. Inca is self-fruitful (no pollinizer required). Supplies are very limited.

**Elephant Heart.** Another Luther Burbank introduction, this is a "dessert plum" with super-sweet dark red-purple fruit from late August into September. Needs Santa Rosa, probably the best-known and most widely planted plum in California (and yet another Luther Burbank introduction), as a pollinizer.

### Citrus: Pixie mandarin

Citrus trees have a very long history in California. In fact, it was William Wolfskill, brother of John, who planted the first citrus orchard in the 1840s in what is now downtown Los Angeles. Citrus had been planted at the early missions in Southern California in the 1700's, and he procured his seedlings from the San Gabriel Mission.

Seedless navel oranges were planted in the 1870s, all descendants of the original tree still growing in Riverside. The Citrus Experiment Station was founded at UC Riverside in the early 1900's and promptly began selecting and releasing new varieties.

Citrus trees form new varieties by spontaneous mutation, induced mutation, natural hybridization, and intentional breeding. Pixie was a seedling of a natural hybrid of two other mandarins. Naturally seedless, very sweet, and late ripening, the fruit was too small for the consumer and farmer preferences of the time. So, it languished as a variety and barely existed in the nursery trade.

Fast forward several decades, and a large agribusiness firm in California starts marketing small, seedless, easily peeled mandarins. Cuties and Haloos are market brand programs for small mandarins of several types (Clementine, Murcott, and Tango varieties). Turns out kids really like sweet citrus that they can peel in one piece, and their parents really like to buy them.



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Suddenly that old Pixie variety that had been around for decades came back in fashion, though availability is still somewhat limited.

According to the citrus station at Riverside (now the Givaudan Citrus Variety Collection at UCR), “Pixie matures in late winter and holds exceptionally late on the tree; in certain mild locations, the fruit is known to hold well into summer.”

In our area, Pixie would be a great addition to your year-around fruit collection, ripening from March into June and potentially later.

Fruit and nut trees and vines have been significant crops in Northern California since the influx of immigrants from the south (Spanish missions), north (Russian fur traders), and east (Anglo settlers). All brought their favored crops with them. Some have prospered and become part of our unique California horticultural heritage.

For more information about the Ark of Taste, visit <https://slowfoodusa.org/ark-of-taste/>.



Blenheim apricots “ripen from the inside out” according to produce experts, so they aren’t bright gold when you pick them. There are prettier apricots out there, but none with the distinctive flavor of Blenheim. Also marketed as Royal or Royal Blenheim.

Photo courtesy of L.E. Cooke Co.



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Rio Oso Gem is a late-ripening peach variety that has been grown for many decades in California. It has rich flavor and firm texture and the tree is naturally fairly small and has very showy flowers. A great backyard peach variety for our area.



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Inca plum was introduced by the famous plant breeder, Luther Burbank, in 1919. Crisp texture, nice balance of sweet and tart, it is prolific in early August.