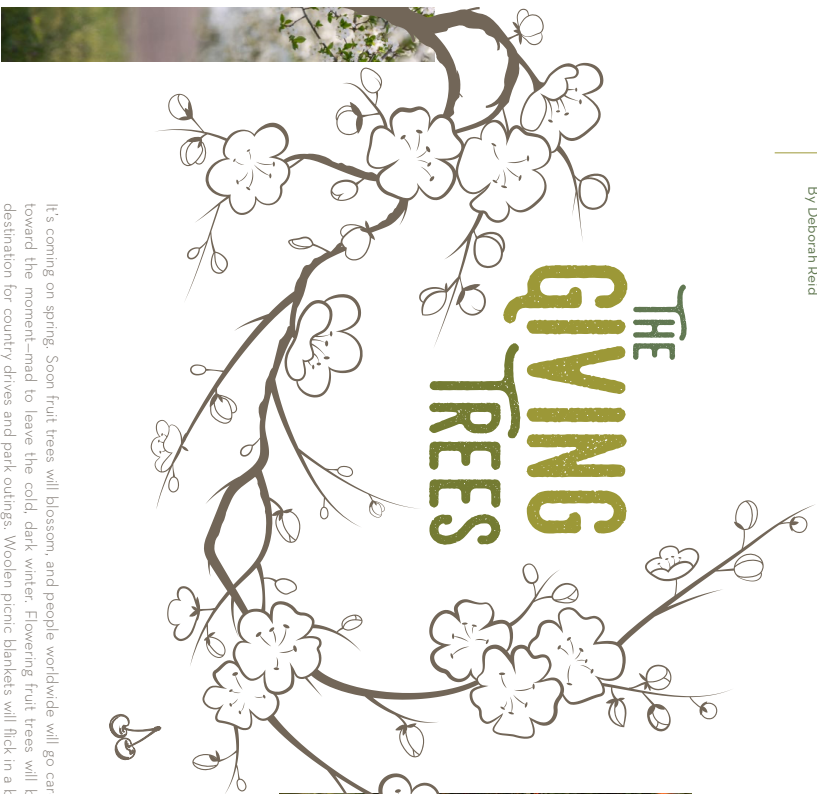


Orchards are unique in agriculture, beloved for their beauty and nostalgic appeal as much as for their bounty. As family farms are both celebrated and endangered, Montana communities are finding new ways to help these orchards endure.

By Deborah Reid

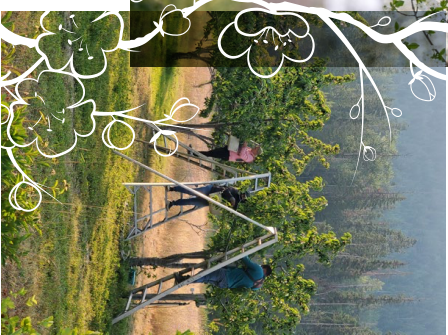
THE GIVING TREES



It's coming on spring. Soon fruit trees will blossom, and people worldwide will go careering toward the moment—mad to leave the cold, dark winter. Flowering fruit trees will be the destination for country drives and park outings. Woolen picnic blankets will flick in a breeze and drift to the ground. Family and friends will settle to share food and conversation while pink and white petals whorl all around. The Japanese call this pleasure *hanami*: a confluence of being social and in nature.

In his book *Taming Fruit*, Bernd Brunner writes, "Perhaps it makes sense to think about an orchard as a kind of stage—one where a highly specific drama plays out between fruit trees and their caretakers...orchards invite us to enjoy the complex spectacle of fruit growing and ripening in the company of animals, people, and other plants."

"I never get tired of cherries," says Gary Johnson of the Orchard at Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana. "At the end of the season, I'm climbing the trees to find the fruit that was missed." Johnson's parents bought the property in the mid-1970s, and 30 years later, he returned home and began the transition to organic. The lake creates a temperate growing environment. The summer is cool and the nights warm, ideal conditions for tender fruit. The Flathead Valley produces three million pounds of cherries annually. It once produced three times that, but a devastating freeze in the late 1980s destroyed swaths of trees.



The weather is always a worry, but some of the most impactful threats capping orchard expansion are economic. First, farmers pulled fruit trees to raise livestock and plant corn in hopes of better, more stable returns. The ubiquitous real estate developers followed, encroaching on prime agricultural land on the shores of places like Flathead Lake. The surrounding community experiences the loss of access to local food sources.

"We worked with a couple of groups to start community orchards like Ruby Habitat Foundation in the Ruby Valley, where there are some of the most beautiful heritage orchards I've visited," says Katrina Mendrey, orchard program manager at the Western Agricultural Research Center at Montana State University. "We also planted to apple trees outside the Carter County Museum in Kalaska."

Beyond a reliable food source, orchards come with other ancillary benefits. Carbon sequestering, for one: a fruit tree can be in the ground for up to 20 years in a modern orchard, and tilling is minimal. Then there's the rich biodiversity nurtured among the fruit trees. "I love the apple orchard in my village," says Claire Masset, author of the charming

book *Orchards*. "At the moment, the fallen apples are being devoured by winter-visiting flocks of haldanes and redwing." It's mid-February in Gary Johnson's orchard, and in the next few weeks, he'll prune the trees and then shift to mowing and weeding the 11 acres through to summer. Harvest happens in late July. "It's quick. I can get a half dozen people in here and pick it in a few days," he says. "The cherries are pitted and frozen into 30-pound buckets." Harvesting and production amount to an intense couple of weeks.

In a valley where most fruit is exported to Taiwan, Johnson's approach is unique. He sells to health food stores and local gift shops, spreading the cash flow across the calendar. His frozen fruit is made into jam, chutney, barbecue sauce and cherry topping for cheesecake or sundae. Eventually, he'd like to tap more deeply into agritourism.

At pick-your-own apple orchards, families participate in the ancient harvest cycle. Children chase each other between rows of trees, spill heavy baskets of fruit on the ground and pitch a core as far as possible, just as their parents and grandparents did in generations before. Orchards are where bees get drunk on nectar in the spring, geese and sheep graze in the shade of a leafy canopy in high summer and barren branches reach to meet an azure winter sky. They're a place of natural abundance. A reminder that the season is always turning, and fruit is not the sole purpose.

