



Thought on diseased wild trees

Posted by [Tom Kleffman](#)

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[Tom Kleffman](#)

[Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

December 12, 2018 04:39AM

Registered: 6 years ago

Posts: 30

I have been working for 3 years, slowly building an orchard from scratch with my kids, 4.5 miles south of Lake Superior, halfway between Cornucopia WI and Bayfield.

I have some wild seedling apples on the property, varying in age from 15-100 years old, that have an incredibly variety of apples, but most of them have serious disease issues.

Was thinking, to preserve the heritage of the property, but rid myself of diseased wild trees, to cut them down, burn the wood, and stool the stumps, either pruning to one or just making clones I place elsewhere.

Space is not an issue for me. I am doing nearly all full sized trees anyway and have 23 of 40 acres open for planting. I am simply wondering if there is anyone who has taken the route of rejuvenating ancient trees by cutting them down?

(I have made graft copies of most, just in my mind, for a long time an apple tree has been in that spot/s and maybe by just cutting the top off, I can make a new disease free copy in the exact spot).

Thoughts?

Tom Kleffman

Tom Kleffman

currently building a fruit orchard from scratch on the Bayfield Peninsula of Wisconsin, 4 miles south of Lake Superior, dead center of the snow belt, zone 5.

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[Michael Phillips](#)

[Re: Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

December 16, 2018 12:56AM

Moderator

Registered: 11 years ago

Posts: 621

I'm going to ask you to clarify a couple points, Tom, in hopes this will give others enough information to respond.

The notion of "escaping disease" by removal of a tree to ground level --and thus a reboot provided the root system sprouts anew -- demands we understand deep systemic reality versus biological and nutritional deficits within a given growing system. A tree with fire blight or black rot limb canker has a limited future. I doubt you can escape vascular penetration by fire blight bacteria by simply cutting a seedling (wild) tree back to ground level. Such a move will set black rot advantage back to square one . . .but it also eliminates the fruiting tree . . . and I'm not sure that is a strategy for humans with limited life spans. If on the other hand, you mean scab, rust, mildew etc. by condemning these trees due to "disease" and general decline overall . . . you in turn need to embrace soil health and mineralization and green immune function and competitive colonization and orchard compost 101. Read the books, read the website, read other posts if you don't grasp what is meant by such basic holistic concepts.

Now the horticultural challenge. A mature fruiting tree cut to ground level has a 50-50 chance of revival by throwing up stump sprouts. (Challenge that observation, y'all, if you think different.) These shoots in turn can be thinned to one or two that get grafted to a desirable variety. A similar argument can be made for topworking existing branch structure so as to preserve photosynthetic oomph for the roots and fungi below. Here's where I think others can share actual experience.

Enough from me. Working with tree response is certainly fun!

[Lost Nation Orchard](#)

Zone 4b in New Hampshire

[Reply Quote](#)

[Tom Kleffman](#)

[Re: Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

December 16, 2018 01:43AM

Registered: 6 years ago

Posts: 30

<grin> well, I have read all of YOUR books so I have book knowledge on it all, but that is not the same as in practice. The big issues are ancient trees rotting out. And by big, I mean their old trunks are more than 16" in diameter. They have live parts, lots of dead parts, and they have shown some fire blight. Since they have managed to hold on through lord knows how many bears climbing and tearing them up, other trees dropping branches through them, sapsuckers turning their bark into a pincushion, while still setting here and there some good fruits, I feel bad about killing them altogether. The most ancient ones had dead centers nearly down to the ground and I took them out completely this last fall. (cut down close to the ground)

The oldest, honestly, were not in really good places. Perhaps when they originally grew it was, but now many of them are surrounded by 80-100 year old black spruce and never will get enough sunlight. If they stool, I can graft them onto other rootstock. At one time they would have been forest edge trees, but that forest edge moved on them while they stayed in the same place.

It is more the current forest edge trees I am thinking of. These are much younger on average. Their seedlings prospered where they grew, and harder to get better forest edge ecology than actual forest edge. I had been thinking (and I could be wrong) that the disease issues came from injury from bears, and the openings it created in the tree's inner wood as they tore down branches to reach apples. I have found a pretty good way to deter both bears and deer. I am not going to be able to eliminate all wild trees, because apparently the area is great for wild germination. Any walk on the surrounding public land includes sights of wild apple trees. Upside to that, is that so far, ringing trees with 60" rebar cages is enough of a deterrent because there is no shortage of other apples available. So for the ones damaged, but probable good root systems in a forest edge environment, with apples we enjoy eating, I thought stooling would get rid of the issues the trees have, and having a full-sized root system would lend itself to fairly quick new tree growth.

Or perhaps best to start over, and if I want new trees that are whatever wild crosses they were, I should just take pieces of them and graft onto new rootstock in the areas I am managing for new trees.

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[Philippe Smith](#)

[Re: Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

August 04, 2020 09:31PM

Registered: 4 years ago

Posts: 4

My wife and I are asking ourselves the same questions Tom. We purchased an 88 acre dream property in the Ottawa Valley four years ago. A tributary to the Ottawa river runs through our land, and this small river valley is an absolute wildlife corridor. When deciding what to plant here, we noted that there are literally hundreds of wild apples trees on the lot. No doubt, the propagation of these trees is due in large part to the constant deer and bear traffic.

With so many wild apple trees thriving here, we decided to start a cider orchard. Three years later, we have 300 trees and so far so good. However, along with all these unkempt neighbors comes the pests and diseases. We have gone through several rounds of RHAB and FHAB, but what is keeping me up at night this year is the fire blight. Some of the wild trees are just getting absolutely smashed! We have only noticed one of our Golden Russets with a few fire blight shoots. Thankfully I was able to nip them in the bud immediately.

Moving forward, I worry that I will spend the rest of my days fighting, or at least managing, what may become an un-winnable battle against this disease. There is no way that we would ever remove hundreds of wild trees from our land, and managing them seems like an impossible task. Besides, we very keen to follow Claude Jolicoeur's lead and attempt to discover new wild cider varieties on our property...So, I'm left wondering if it is just a matter of time before our efforts to grow healthy trees will all be in vain?

Any comments or thoughts would be greatly appreciated.

Philippe Smith

Alluvia

Bristol, Quebec

Zone 4B

[Reply Quote](#)

[Todd Parlo](#)

[Re: Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

August 05, 2020 02:42PM

Registered: 10 years ago

Posts: 301

Whether to keep wild species (apple is only one example) depends a great deal on a grower's stamina or their desire to gamble. What I mean by this is that any species that is a vector for disease or pests will always carry risk. This means it either should be removed, be managed as well as a domesticated (planted) specimen, or should be left alone as a gamble. When I coach, I like to simply inform growers of the facts and risks and then let them make a decision, rather than telling them what to do. Truth be told I have used all three methods with varying levels of success.

It is also important to think more deeply about how native and domestic plants behave with each other. For example, borers (like rhab) will infect not just apple, but pear, mountain ash, all amelanchiers, etc. There are pests and disease that can transfer to apple from hundreds of plant species, including both woody perennials and herbaceous ones. This is where the eradication (clean slate) approach gets tricky. It is true, however, that there is a great difference in dangers when dealing with fireblight from a hawthorn versus a mildew from a bramble. It is also true that many plants in the environment are performing some ecosystem services that we are barely aware of.

I did want to comment also on the strategy Tom had suggested above regarding rejuvenation. It should be obvious that a younger and more resilient tree is going to respond better to major surgery like this. It is safest to embark over a several year period for best effect. It should clearly be done during late dormancy (ideally a month before budbreak). Something to be prepared for however is that seedlings cut into juvenile wood will take far longer to reset fruit (in nearly all cases) compared with grafted trees. The juvenile portion is going to be that most proximal (the core section comprising the trunk and interior portions of the older limbs). The basic procedure is simply no different than dealing with canker outbreak in the orchard itself, only perhaps more dramatic. Like Michael warns however, I have seen little success rejuvenating when a tree has a perennial canker or disease which has found its way into the major branch bases or trunk, so assume these are now systemic. Also note that trees suffering due to conditions like intense shading, waterlogging, crowding, etc are not going to be cured through pruning or any other management technique.

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[Claude Jolicoeur](#)

[Re: Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

August 07, 2020 03:31AM

Philippe Smith Wrote:

Registered: 11 years ago

Posts: 226

> However, along with all these unkempt neighbors
> comes the pests and diseases. We have gone through
> several rounds of RHAB and FHAB, but what is
> keeping me up at night this year is the fire
> blight. Some of the wild trees are just getting
> absolutely smashed! We have only noticed one of
> our Golden Russets with a few fire blight shoots.
> Thankfully I was able to nip them in the bud
> immediately.

I am puzzled by this. All wild apples patches I have seen were very healthy. This comes from natural selection - a tree that is not naturally resistant to pest / sickness will get blasted in its young age. Hence the trees that reach maturity are naturally resistant to the bad things in their environment.

One explanation I see is that fire blight maybe was not present in your environment when those trees were young. Hence natural selection did not occur then. And nowadays, possibly the blight was introduced one way or another and can hit all sensitive trees. If you let nature do its thing, the sensitive trees will be killed and the survivors are those that have natural resistance. These will reproduce themselves and an equilibrium will be attained in the long run (but we will likely be dead from old age by then).

Yes, all this is quite theoretical, and I don't have a solution for you. Here where I am, there is no fire blight, and I keep my fingers crossed...

Claude

[Jolicoeur Orchard](#)

Zone 4 in Quebec

Author, [The New Cider Maker's Handbook](#)

[Reply Quote](#)

[Philippe Smith](#)

[Re: Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

August 08, 2020 06:36AM

Salut Claude,

Registered: 4 years ago

Posts: 4

Yes, I'm quite surprised by the amount of fireblight in the older apple trees as well. I very much subscribe to your theory. Something has changed here.

Having grown up in the area, I don't remember ever seeing fireblight. However this year it is fairly wide spread throughout the county. Perhaps this is due to climate change. Certainly a very hot and humid summer here.

Today I spoke with Pépinière aux Arbres Fruitières, just north of Laval. They've never had fireblight. Unfortunately, two of their Honey Golds got it this summer, so it seems to be on the move.

Maybe all this has something to do with the fact that it's 2020 lol!! Hard to know for sure. Just keep those fingers crossed Claude, at least until 2021

Philippe Smith

Alluvia

Bristol, Quebec

Zone 4B

[Reply Quote](#)

[Tom Kleffman](#)

[Re: Thought on diseased wild trees](#)

October 26, 2020 04:29PM

Registered: 6 years ago

Posts: 30

Well, since my initial post, I was in a car wreck, have gone through 4 back surgeries, and keeping up with things has been....difficult.

I went with eliminating the trees that had issues down to the ground, and aggressive pruning/protection of younger trees that had issues with bear damage but looked as though they would be ok if I could stop them from getting torn apart every year.

So far, so good with them. Have cleared out around their bases, opening up more sunlight to the tops, removed the broken large branches, given them 5x5 concrete remesh cages to deter large animals, and gotten some good apples from them. A few of them so good that I took cuttings this spring and made some more of them on 118 & 106 in a more managed setting.

No new fireblight issues on my property this year. Have noticed some where power company topped trees under powerlines, but not my property so cannot do anything about that.

We will see how it all goes. Coming on to downtime to plan and dream here. Winter came early. really early.

Tom

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