

These orchards once provided sustenance for early settlers in the Gulf Islands.

Due West

NATURE

Gulf Island Orchards

The Gulf Islands' public orchards provide both tasty treats and a bite of history

BY JANE MUNDY

VISITORS ARE welcome to pick apples, pears, cherries, plums, quince and nuts in 17 heritage and non-heritage orchards spread across eight Gulf Islands, and you can take up to six pieces per fruit type—when ripe—at any one time.

“Get off the dock on Russell Island, walk through the douglas fir and arbutus trees

and you feel connected to the ancient story of British Columbia,” says Kate Humble, superintendent at Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. “Then all of sudden you see a tree that doesn’t belong—an apple tree. And with it are these white buildings, one of which is a Hawaiian plantation-style home located next to a First Nations sea garden, which

is a wall built for shellfish to grow, like aquaculture. Standing in this place with its incredible diversity of history is an example of how BC and the Gulf Islands came to be today.”

Hawaiians came looking for opportunities during their political upheaval. By 1845, over 200 Hawaiians worked for Hudson Bay Company

in the Pacific Northwest and many “Kanakas” settled on the Gulf Islands. After clearing land for settlement, the newcomers planted orchards with apple varieties from the eastern US and a handful from Europe and Russia. It’s amazing how far apples have travelled. “They traded or sold and their fruit trees grew well in this climate,” adds Humble.



“Some apples were grown to be shipped to Barkerville during the Cariboo gold rush in the 19th century, while other varieties came from places such as Quebec, Indiana and New York, says Laura Judson with Parks Canada. “Settlers likely brought these varieties with them from their homes when they travelled to the Gulf Islands. In fact, while the

Okanagan is now the centre of BC’s fruit industry, the Gulf Islands used to be the largest apple-producing region in the province.” From the 1830s to the 1960s, settlers planted apple seeds and small grafted fruit trees. Today the Gulf Islands orchards are living examples of horticultural practices from the Victorian era (1837 to 1901).

Barrie Agar, president of the BC Fruit Testers Association, has worked with Parks Canada to help identify 24 fruit varieties and 137 individual fruit trees on the islands, including old-fashioned quince that’s making a comeback. But mainly apples.

“I think the Hawaiians planted apples because they bumped into the Scots who are everywhere,” she says, laughing. (She’s right: one orchard on Pender Island was planted by Scottish settlers in 1908.) On a more serious note, Agar says many trees, particularly on Saturna and Mayne islands, are in rough shape because they don’t get watered. Occasionally horticulture students from Camosun College will help prune and restore the trees.

“I recently visited Saturna Island with Parks Canada and we were ambushed by cows. Someone distracted Ursula and Beth (they had nametags) with apples and we found a lemon pippin apple. It’s supposed to taste like lemon but it was a bit over-ripe—the cows weren’t objecting. The aromatic king has excellent flavour hits, like a complex wine, and far superior to a lot of modern varieties that are one-note-wonders.” Agar has identified a Canada reinette (1771) a large culinary apple, or possibly a British Columbia, which was raised from seed in 1859: It is similar to Canada reinette, and has a yellowish skin with russetting. “Russetting is roughened or corky skin. it can be a physiological reaction to salt or wind, but some apples seem to be naturally russeted,” Agar explains. “They often have very good flavour: golden russet, belle



GULF ISLANDS ORCHARDS

The Gulf Islands National Park Reserve lists the top six orchards to visit, some of which are accessible only by boat:

1. Roesland Orchard, North Pender Island:

Apple, pear, cherry, plum and walnut trees were planted in the 1910s by Scottish settler Robert Roe Sr.

2. Shingle Bay Orchard, North Pender Island:

Apple orchard with varieties red delicious, golden delicious and spartan.

3. Palau Orchard (Princess Bay), Portland Island:

31 trees and seven heritage apple varieties, including the newton wonder, lemon pippin, red delicious, northwest greening, winter banana, rome beauty and what is likely the yellow bellflower.

4. James Bay Orchard, Prevost Island:

The largest orchard in the park reserve was established in 1889. It has 23 trees with three varieties of apples: the wealthy and king of tompkins county from the US and the antonovka from Russia.

5. Mahoi Orchard, Russell Island:

Apple and cherry orchard that helped sustain the Mahoi family for generations.

6. Narvaez Bay Orchard, Saturna Island:

Part of a family homestead that was planted in the 1920s and then sold in 1944. It has at least six apple varieties.

de boskoop, roxborough russet, you get the drift.” Some names themselves are exotic: doyenne de comice pear, duchess of oldenburgh apple, carpathian walnut...

But not all heritage varieties are fantastic. Some ripen early before we had gas-controlled storage. Some stored well but weren’t so flavourful so settlers made pies and apple sauce with them in the winter.

Picking isn’t as easy as you

may think. Harvesting must be done by handpicking; picking poles may be used but no ladders are allowed. It could be slim pickings: birds get the ripe cherries and walnut trees are squirrel heaven. So, it’s not as fruitful as going to a u-pick orchard but likely more rewarding: one bite from an apple from these orchards is like Proust’s madeleine cake that evoked memories of things past. ■