

## How to Grow an Apple Tree

By Lisa A.

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The pick-up rumbled alongside the apple orchard row. The uneven ground jostled me and the other kids riding in the truck bed. Despite the 100-degree heat and lack of shade, I felt lucky. I was twelve years old with my first summer job paying five dollars an hour.

Years later I shared this first work experience during a corporate icebreaker. My east coast colleagues were surprised and transfixed by my explanation of how apple trees are grown. Perhaps my story conflicted with their image of folk hero Johnny Appleseed sowing seeds at random. Maybe the tree that grew their grocery-store apple never crossed their mind. But how to grow an apple tree is common knowledge for a girl growing up in Wenatchee, Washington. Miles from home in a bland conference room surrounded by suits, I dispelled more than one misconception.

“It’s a desert climate—eastern Washington,” I said.

“I thought it only rained there?” a colleague asked.

“That’s Seattle and the western part of the state. Wenatchee gets only eight inches of precipitation a year, and that’s mostly snow.”

My hometown’s dry climate results from its location in the rain shadow of the Cascade mountains. In the 1980’s, small apple orchards still dotted the town. Rows of trees stretched along the Wenatchee and Columbia rivers and up onto the valley’s hillsides. Abundant river water irrigated the naturally dry soil and made this desert landscape into the *Apple Capital of the World*.

Eventually development encroached and planting of large-scale orchards started to move further out, to places like Mattawa—not a town really, but a hot dusty place on the map, and the destination for our budstick-cutting cohort on that long-ago August day. The pick-up stopped at a young orchard, its trees little more than twigs poking out of the baked brown earth. The others’ faces showed what I was thinking. It would be a long day trying to find enough two-foot branch lengths needed for grafting sticks.

The nursery owner walked the length of the rows and clipped off branches. We sat in a circle under the unrelenting sun, wearing long sleeves and pants to ward off aphids and sunburn. When a bundle of branches hit the ground in our circle’s center, our crew got to work, snipping off the ends with the immature buds and cutting the leaves back to a quarter-inch stem over the valuable middle buds. Snip. Cut. Cut. Gossip. Tell jokes. Wipe the sweat from one’s brow. Drink some water. Snip. Cut. Cut. Cut.

We bundled the budsticks by variety and kept them moist for transportation to the nursery. Hours later, with our quota filled, we stumbled into the pick-up bed for the ride home—exhausted, sweaty, dirty, and relieved to be finished. Six kids, one nursery owner, and many orchards produced countless budsticks that summer.

With our work finished, a grafter would load a budstick bundle into a pouch attached at the belt. He would pull out a budstick, carve out a bud, insert it into a slit on a rootstock tree, and bind the graft. Tree after tree after tree. From each grafted bud, an apple tree was born. This lucky girl had a hand in creating many new apple trees.

“I thought apple trees grew from seeds?” a company vice president leaned in to ask.

“They can, but one might not get the fruit one expects. Grafting guarantees the apple variety,” I said.

“I didn’t know that,” a colleague said.

I was a novelty—a variety of girl they’d never met, with a story they’d never heard: the story of how to grow an apple tree.