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Horticultural Options when Starting an Organic Apple Orchard

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Abstract

Organic apple production in the eastern United States is significantly influenced by cultivar susceptibility to apple diseases because of the weather conditions during the growing season. In New England, there has been a recent shift away from McIntosh, the historically predominant cultivar, which is very susceptible to apple scab, to newer cultivars due to consumer preference and a shift in market focus from wholesale to more profitable retail and niche markets. A multi-disciplinary, multi-state long-term research project OrganicA Project was initiated in 2006 at the University of Vermont. One objective of this project is to incorporate and evaluate new apple cultivars and research-generated knowledge of apple ecosystem dynamics into organic production systems to determine their sustainability and profitability. We are examining two major production systems growers would use in changing cultivars: top-grafting (an 18 year-old orchard was top-grafted to Zestar!, Ginger Gold, Honeycrisp, Liberty, and Macoun) and establishing a new orchard by planting new trees of the same cultivars purchased from a nursery. The information presented here represents a comparison of alternative horticultural methods, techniques, and cost associated with these two systems during the establishment years.