

The Bourassa apple

The Bourassa apple was an important apple variety in Quebec in the years 1750 and up to 1900, by which date its popularity started to decline. It was also grown in the Northeastern states of USA and has been described in many pomology works of the period 1850 – 1880.

The historian Paul-Louis Martin writes the following in « Les fruits du Québec », 2002 (my translation from French): « Here is a very mysterious apple whose origin and course are almost mythical : already mentioned in the literature by the middle of the 18th century, it is qualified by Baronne von Riedesel as one of the best in the country (1784). It was surely well known in the orchards around Montreal as in 1873 it is still considered « very best in Lower Canada, and in Maine and Vermont » (T. Gregg, 1873 : 49) before disappearing strangely from the fruit picture a few years later ».

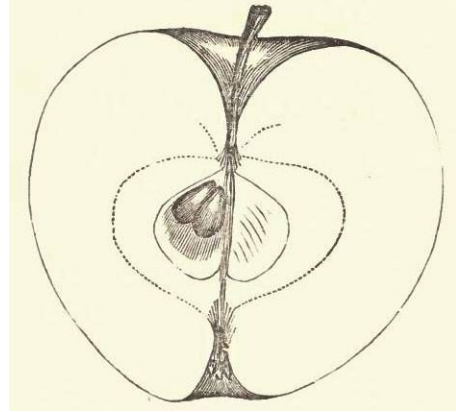


Image of Bourassa from Elliott's Fruit Book (1854)

In the dictionary of French in Canada by Mario Lemoine, we find under Pomme (apple) : « Pomme de Bourassa = espèce de pomme grise. – Can. - Relevé par le P. Potier, en 1743 », indicating that by 1743, the Bourassa apple was well enough known as to give its name to any grayish apple.

In « Le verger » from Provancher, 1874, we have the following description (my translation from French): « Bourassa - Large, conical, grayish red; flavour rich, spicy, slightly dry. Recommended for the North as it is very hardy. From Canada. October – March ».

We then find trace of Bourassa in the « Statement of public accounts of Quebec for 1877 » where it is mentioned in a list with the Fameuse and the Pomme Grise in a report about the fruits that were sent to Philadelphia for the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876. After that I haven't been able to find any description in the canadian literature (but only accounts of its decline, read further). Macoun, the great canadian pomologist didn't mention it in his reports of 1901 and 1916. Neither did Santerre (1903) in « Culture des arbres et des arbustes fruitiers », or Woolverton in his « Fruits of Ontario » of 1899.

There are many references to the Bourassa apple in the american pomology works of the 19th century:

From John Jacob Thomas, « The American fruit culturist ... » (1850): « Rather large, ovate-conical, ribbed, somewhat irregular, a rich orange russet on a rich golden surface, dark reddish brown to the sun ; stalk an inch and a fourth long, cavity small, irregular ; basin small and narrow ; flesh fine-grained, sub-acid, rich, fine. Succeeds well far north. »

From F.R. Elliott, « Elliott's Fruit Book ... » (1854): « Foreign. Succeeds finely in Canada and northern sections, - Vermont, North Michigan, on poor soil, etc. Fruit, medium, ovate conical, slightly ribbed, occasionally irregular; color, rich, orange russet on yellow, reddish brown in sun; stem, long, slender; cavity, small, irregular; calyx, with long segments; basin, narrow; core, rather large; seeds, few; flesh, white, fine grained, sub-acid; "best". October to January. »

From J.A. Warder, « American Pomology. Apples » (1867) : « Class IV-Oblong ; Order II-Irregular ; Section 2-Sour ; Sub-section 3-Russet. Bourassa. Foreign. Said to do well in the North ; have seen it handsome at Detroit. Fruit Medium, oblong, ovate, somewhat angular and ribbed ; surface yellow, covered lightly with a rich red russet, giving it an orange hue. Basin small ; eye small, closed ; segments very long. Cavity deep, acute, wavy ; stem long. Flesh white or stained, tender ; flavor acid, spicy, aromatic ; quality pretty good, but apt to be tough and wilted ; season November to december. Not worth trying in the South. »

From A.J. Downing, « The fruits and fruit-trees of America » (1869 edition) :
 « Bourassa - A foreign variety, succeeds well at the north, apt to shrivel and does not keep well. Fruit medium, roundish, conic, ribbed. Skin yellowish, rich orange russet on the sunny side. Stem rather long, in a deep uneven cavity. Calyx closed, segments large, basin very small. Flesh white sometimes stained, tender, with a pleasant aromatic flavour. November, December. »

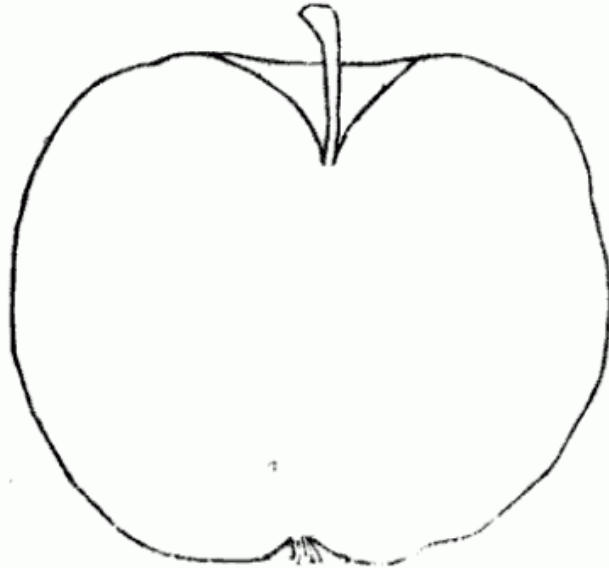
And the section and description on the right are from the Genesee Farmer journal, Rochester, NY, Vol. XI, 1850, p.96.

It seems the Bourassa was also known in England as Hogg mentions it in his « British Pomology » of 1851. He writes : « Bourassa. Synonyme Barossa. A medium sized conical apple, of second-rate quality ; it is russeted and red, suitable either for culinary or dessert use ; and is in season from October to December. » Hogg refers to the Catalog of the fruits cultivated in the garden of the Horticultural Society of London, of which I have been able to find the second edition of 1831, where the Bourassa (and the synonym Barossa) is simply mentioned without any other detail given.

We also find in « The Apples of Maine » by G.A. Stilphen (1993) : « The only mention we find of Bourassa in Maine is in the advertisement of Gilbreth's nursery at Kendall's Mills in 1861, and a description by Dr. Hoskins of Newport, Vermont, in 1882. » With the following references : No. Amer. Pom. Cong. 1849 : 83; Maine Farmer, May 16, 1861; Downing : 122; Agriculture of Maine (State report) 1882 : 342.

The note by Dr. Hoskins (from the Agriculture of Maine report) is on 4 russet apples that are often confused. At the end of his note he adds: « Among russets that are not keepers, but are of the highest quality as dessert fruit, and are quite hardy far north, (though not strictly 'iron clad') we would like to call attention to two sorts which we have growing in our own grounds. They are both Canadian in their origin, unless, indeed, they came originally from France. One is the Whitney Russet [...]. The other is the Bourassa. (pronounced Boo-ra-saw,) which is a very poor grower when root-grafted, but does well top-worked on a strong stock, and then produces bountifully of apples varying remarkably in size on the same tree, but all with a dark russet coat and a rich crimson cheek. In quality the Bourassa leaves nothing to be desired, being, when well grown, rich, soft-fleshed, and very pear-like in quality. Its season is September. »

Dr. Hoskins was from Newport in Northern Vermont, just on the other side of the border from Stanstead, Quebec, so trees of Bourassa were growing there at the end of the 19th century.



THE BOURASSA APPLE.

In Lower Canada and the northern portions of this country, this is esteemed one of the very best of apples, ranking with the *Fameuse* and *Pomme Gris*, which are considered the standard of excellence. At our late exhibition of winter fruits, this variety was shown, and we believe pronounced by nearly all to be one of the highest flavored and best apples on the tables; some, indeed, went so far as to call it *the best*. For our own part, however, we think it a hardy, valuable variety for the north, high flavored and fine, but it lacks the tenderness, juiciness and delicacy of the *Melon* or *Northern Spy*, and for which we, at least, are disposed to give them the preference.

It is an apple that bears carriage exceedingly well, and a little frost does not hurt it. It keeps well, seldom becoming rotten at the core. It should occupy a prominent position in the orchard in cold northern localities. Size above medium. Form roundish conical, slightly ribbed. Stalk about three-fourths of an inch, slender, and inserted rather deeply in a pretty wide cavity. Calyx large, closed, and set in a shallow, plaited basin. Skin reddish russet, some bright red on the sunny side. Flesh white, fine grained, crisp, not very juicy, with a sprightly, agreeable flavor. November to April.

We may follow the decline of the Bourassa apple in 'The Canadian Horticulturist' monthly journal. In vol.16, 1893, p.203: « Our old time favorites 'Pomme Grise', 'Bourassa' and 'Calvilles', etc., are no longer cultivated, having become unprofitable ». And again, in vol.31 of the year 1908, we find 2 citations. First on p.27: « The Blue Pearmain, Pomme Grise and Bourassa, once very common and much esteemed, have become so unproductive that they have ceased to be planted in commercial orchards ». And then on p.100, in an article on the Fameuse apple: « This variety (i.e. Fameuse) will not be abandoned by orchardists for the same reason that numerous other varieties of our fine Quebec seedlings have gone out of existence (such as Bourassa and Pomme Grise, which were shy bearers) because La Fameuse is a wonderfully productive and profitable variety... ». Speculations are open as to how an apple that was described as one that 'produces bountifully' by Dr. Hoskins has become so unproductive 25 years later. It may be noted that in these 3 citations, Bourassa is always quoted side by side with the Pomme Grise which still exists.

Finally, we may note that the Bourassa apple is not mentioned in the « Apples of New York » of S.A. Beach (1905). Nor is it mentioned by Coxe in 1817. A search in some of the continental European works (Leroy, 1867-1879, or Mas, 1872-1883) did not give any result.

In summary, from the accounts that we have we may write the following description:

Size: Medium to large, variable within the same tree.

Shape: Conical, ovate-conical, oblong-ovate, roundish-conical. Ribbed, irregular, angular.

Color: Grayish red to orange russet and reddish brown on the sun,

Background color: Yellow to golden or orange, with some russet.

Stem: Long.

Cavity: Small, irregular, deep, acute, wavy, uneven.

Basin: Narrow, small or very small.

Eye: Small, closed.

Segments: Large, long, or very long.

Core: Rather large, with few seeds.

Flesh: White or stained, fine-grained, tender or soft, sub-acid.

Flavor: Rich, spicy, aromatic. 'Very pear-like in quality'.

Season: from September to December or maybe as late as April. Not considered a keeper by some.

We are searching for a living tree of this apple so we could propagate it again! If you know of the whereabouts of this apple, please contact John Bunker (trees@fedcoseeds.com) or Claude Jolicoeur (cjoli@gmc.ulaval.ca).

Compilation by Claude Jolicoeur, Québec,
with help from John Bunker, Maine, and Todd Parlo, Vermont.

Rev. November 2010.