

It's Apple Time

The North Georgia Mountains offer fresh air, beautiful scenery and apples for the picking.

By Rachel Roberts Quartarone





When the first hint of autumn is in the air, the hills of North Georgia beckon. Leaf watchers travel the curvy roads to take in the colorful scenery. Sleepy towns come alive with fall festivals, and roadside farm stands welcome their peak season. There are pumpkin patches, corn mazes and plenty of boiled peanuts. And it's apple time.



September and October mark the height of Georgia's apple season. It's when the most variety and abundance are available and the only time of year some apple houses open their doors to guests for the seasonal festivities. There are hayrides, apple cannons, petting zoos, fried pies and hot cider. But for many the highlight is plucking the fruit straight from the tree and filling a bag with the freshest of apples.

Remember eating a mealy, tasteless apple from the grocery store? It's probably because it was grown over 2000 miles away, picked prematurely, gassed to artificially ripen, and kept in cold storage for up to a year before it even made it to the grocery store shelf. The apples in North Georgia are literally fresh from the trees, juicy and full of flavor.

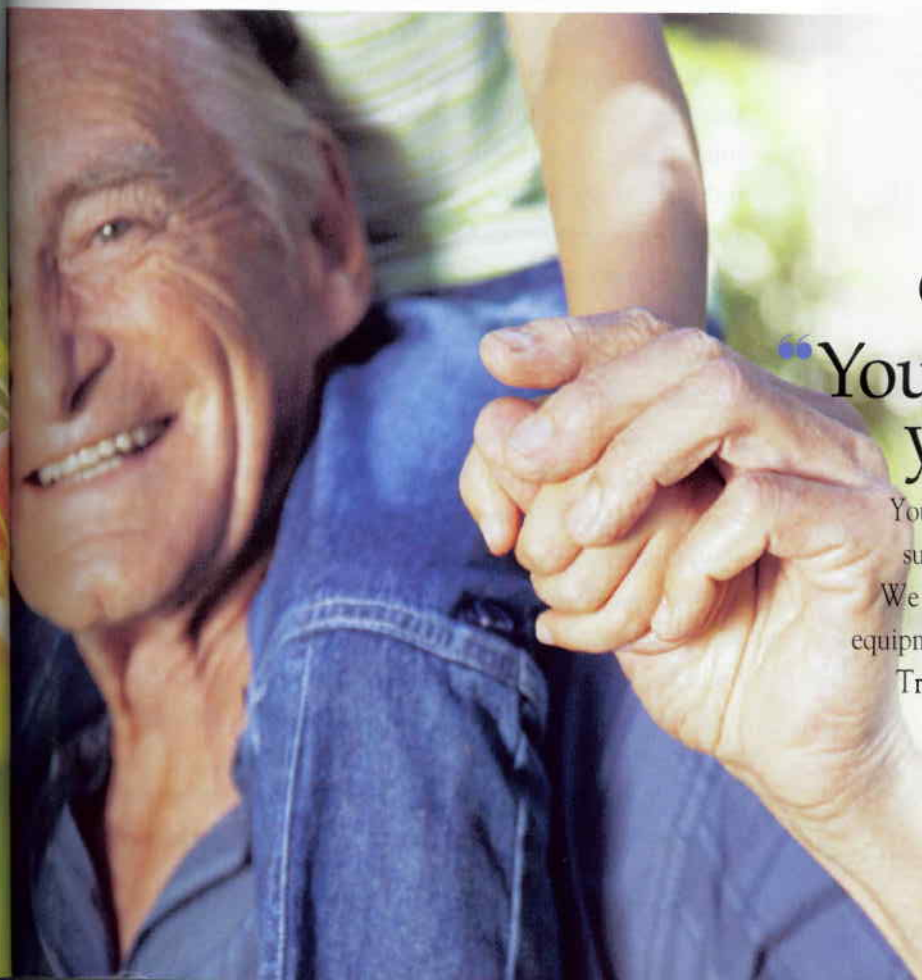
While the orchards offer many of the same apple varieties, each apple house has its own personality. Some are open year-round; others are open only for the main harvest season. Some offer U-pick only on the weekends, while others allow picking during the week. Some offer activities, but others are just about the apples. Get out, ride around and try them all.

Along Apple Alley

Ellijay, in Gilmer County, is a great place to start the apple journey. Located about 70 miles north of Atlanta, the county produces roughly 600,000 bushels of apples each fall. It's proudly known as the "Apple Capital of Georgia." Locals call the area along Highway 52, six miles east of Ellijay's town square, "Apple Alley" since several of the largest orchards are located there. On October weekends, Highway 52 can come to a standstill as leaf changing and apple season hit their peaks. The second and third weekends of October are particularly busy as Ellijay puts on the annual Georgia Apple Festival in celebration of the homegrown fruit. www.georgiaapplefestival.org

Reece's Orchard

Located along Highway 52, Reece's Orchard has been in business since 1967, and like most orchards in Gilmer County, is a family-run operation. "We used to see people mainly coming to get apples for canning and putting up, but not anymore," says owner Rachel Reece. "People really want to get out into the countryside and show their kids that apples grow on trees."



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They want to get away from the hustle and bustle of what they do daily." She and her husband John took over operation from John's father B.J. Reece 17 years ago. Reece's offers some 30 varieties of apples. They offer U-pick beginning about September 1st when the first varieties like Gala, Mutsu and Golden Delicious are ripe. The trees are usually picked clean by the end of October.

Reece's Orchards also offers a petting farm, hayrides and an apple cannon, each for a small fee. U-pick is available every day during September and October. Activities like the hayride are offered Wednesday through Sunday. For the latest information on orchard activities and U-pick availability, call before heading out. The farm market is open 8am to 6pm daily from mid-July through December. www.reeceorchards.com

Hillcrest Orchards

Just a few miles down the road from Reece's Orchard is a hub of activity every weekend in September and October during Apple Pickin' Jubilee. For a \$6 admission fee, visitors can pick their own apples, milk a cow, watch pigs race, jump in a bouncy house and take a wagon ride. There's also live entertainment, a playground, games and a petting zoo (for an additional fee). The orchard offers at least six different varieties of apples to pick, including the popular Rome Beauty, Cameo and Arkansas Black varieties.

Janice Hale grew up working the orchard that her father founded. She, along with other family and employees, works



year-round to bring the market to life each fall – planting, harvesting, leading school tours, preparing the market and planning activities. She's seen the business change from a mostly wholesale operation to 100 percent retail. The orchard was early to embrace the agritourism trend. For the past 17 years they've offered the Apple Pickin' Jubilee that grows larger each year. For many families, visiting Hillcrest each fall has become tradition.


Hillcrest offers U-pick during festival weekends only. However, the farm market is open daily from 9am to 6pm during the months of September and October and 9am to 5pm during November. www.hillcrestorchards.net

The Hills of Blue Ridge

While certainly the "Apple Capital," Gilmer County can't claim the largest apple orchard in the state. That honor belongs to Mercier Orchards in neighboring Fannin County just outside of Blue Ridge. It was founded in 1943 by Bill and Adele Mercier. In fact, you can still find Ms. Adele in the farm market most days alongside family members from four generations. The orchard offers over 50 varieties of apples throughout the growing season. To pick, buy a bag in the market and take a tractor ride up the steep hill to the orchards. Just past the pond is the historic apple house perched on the hilltop. Mountain views are all around. A helpful guide will share the history of the orchard before pointing the way to the apple trees.

U-pick is available on Saturdays and Sundays as soon as the first apples mature. This year the harvest season

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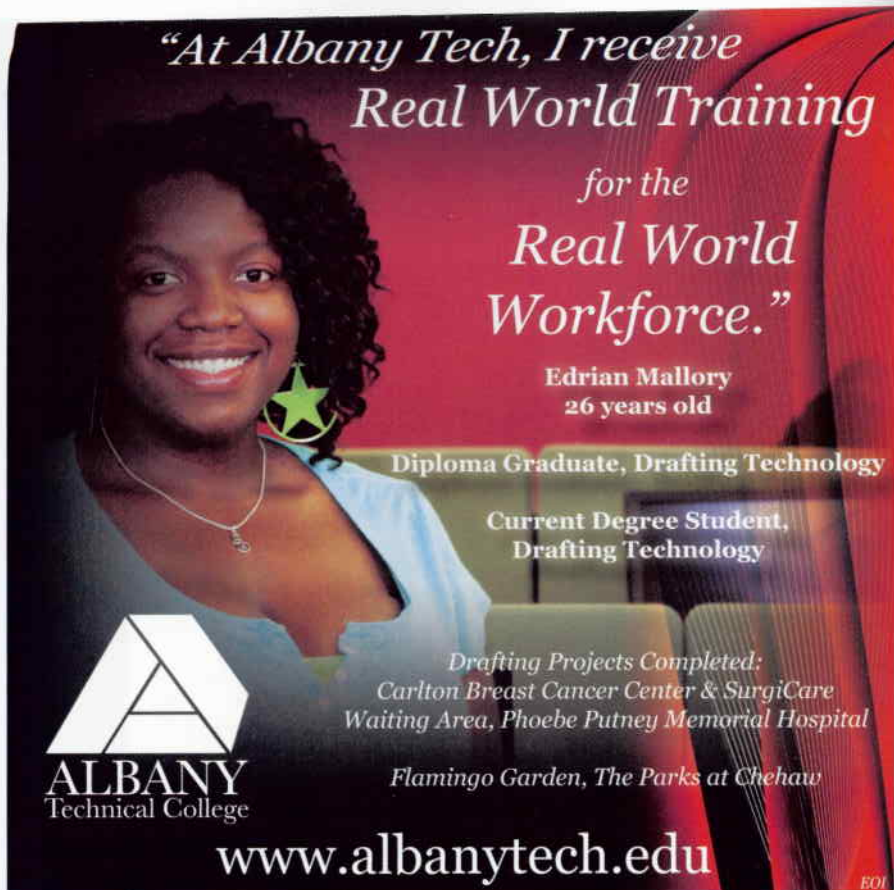
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began in July, much earlier than usual due to the warm weather, says Kim Foster, Mercier's spokesperson. The orchard anticipates most of the apples will be gone by early to mid-October, so plan your trip accordingly. If picking your own doesn't work out, you can always drown your sorrows in a cup of hard cider – Mercier's newest venture. Tastings are available Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 11am until 7pm. The farm market is open daily, year-round, 7am to 8pm and offers fresh apples, seasonal produce and a variety of apple products. A fried pie is an absolute must. The market bakery offers 22-25 different types, all made on-site. www.mercier-orchards.com

Picking Tips:

- Get there early. To avoid crowds, plan to hit the orchards in the morning. It's usually the least crowded time of day to visit. Weekdays are great, too.
- Call ahead if you have your heart set on picking your own. Availability is always dependent on what crops are ready and the weather.
- Feel free to sample as you pick. However, wipe it off first. Apples do contain a small amount of pesticide residue. With Georgia's warm climate, it's very difficult to grow apples organically. Most North Georgia orchards use an integrated pest management system. This means they closely monitor the trees and only treat as needed, ensuring as little pesticide use as possible.
- Make a day of it. Pick apples, attend the Georgia Apple Festival, go antique shopping in Ellijay or enjoy lunch or dinner in picturesque downtown Blue Ridge. For more information about what to do and see, visit the local Chamber of Commerce websites at www.gilmerchamber.com and www.blueridgemountains.com.



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