

# Centennial Growers

## Milburn Orchards

By David Eddy  
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**P**ERHAPS there's no greater compliment to a grower than to be called progressive. John W. Milburn was such a grower. He was so progressive, in fact, that he planted Red Delicious apples. Say what? Well, pulling out producing standard, old-time Red Delicious and planting Starking Red Delicious was indeed considered progressive in 1938. Milburn was born in 1901, one year before his father, Esma Bowen Milburn, founded Milburn Orchards. Located in Elkton, a town in the north-east corner of Maryland smack dab between Baltimore and Philadelphia, Milburn Orchards remains a progressive operation a century later.

Esma Milburn ran a general farming operation. It was his son John who began specializing in fruit. He took the plunge in the depths of the Great Depression, a bold move that typified his approach, says his 64-year-old son, Evan. For example, John Milburn planted the Bisbee (also known as the Starkrimson) Delicious the first year it was available in 1956. "That was the revolutionary Red Delicious that started the craze of all the spur-type Red Delicious," says Evan. "He certainly had the guts to try all these new things."

### Times Of Experimenting

A few years later, John Milburn took another risk when he started using Malling 7 and MM. 106 rootstocks on all the varieties he planted. Many growers at the time thought that big trees were the way to go, so a semi-dwarfing rootstock like Malling 7 was looked on with suspicion. "It was considered a big chance back then," says Evan. "That was a big controversy."

In 1959, Evan and his brother, John T. Milburn, now 67, took over the 75



Esma Milburn (left) founded Milburn Orchards in 1902. His son John W. Milburn (right) experimented with new varieties and rootstocks in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1959, John's son, John T. Milburn (middle) expanded the size of the farm to 500 acres.

acres their father had farmed and began expanding the operation. They built it up to 500 acres, which is the size it remained until they recently sold 150 acres. The new generation continued on with their father's plans to reduce the size of the trees, moving on to Malling 9 for apples and planting sweet cherries on Gisela 5 and 6. All peaches are trained to 8 to 9 feet. In fact, Evan was featured in *American Fruit Grower* a decade ago for his efforts to implement the "pedestrian orchard" concept. His efforts, incidentally, have been brought to fruition. "As of five years ago," he says proudly, "we don't have a ladder on the farm."

Many growers favor larger trees because they think they can get more production, says a member of the latest generation to run Milburn Orchards, 33-year-old Nathan Milburn. He handles the farming end of the operation and his cousins, Jay and David Milburn, run the retail/agritourism division, which has become quite extensive. The Milburns prefer dwarfing trees because they don't need the production as much as they want to avoid the added labor costs, plus they want to get better-quality fruit. Because of that, the Milburns continue to visit

experiment stations in efforts to find smaller and better trees, which isn't surprising, especially when you consider that Evan Milburn is a past president of the International Dwarf Fruit Tree Association (IDFTA). "One thing he taught me is to constantly experiment," says Nathan of his dad. "And over the years we've learned what not to plant as well as what to plant," adds Evan with a chuckle.

In addition to serving as president of IDFTA, Evan Milburn has been president of the Maryland State Horticultural Society, and he and Nathan remain active in many associations. Education is a key component of the Milburn Orchards philosophy, and Evan continually drives it home, says his son. "Never think you know it all; never stop learning," says Nathan. "Go to meetings and get to know other people in the industry so you can call on them." The philosophy extends to day-to-day farming operations. "Every day is a learning experience, so he lets me make the decisions," says Nathan of his dad, before adding with a laugh, "but he never lets me make a big mistake."

### Finding A Niche

Though they continue to wholesale to markets up and down the East

Coast, they have come to realize that isn't their niche in the business. "We can't compete with Washington apples or California peaches," says Evan. "We want to make more profit than that." Their plan is to be out of the wholesale business entirely in six to eight years.

Meanwhile, they are putting more emphasis on retail sales, as well as agri-tainment. In the early 1980s, Jay Milburn built the first hay wagon designed specifically for hayrides in their part of the country, and it continues to be a huge success. Since then he has added five more wagons.

"Anything in agri-tainment, we are one of the biggest around here," says Nathan, noting that they get 6000 to 7000 visitors on a big weekend. "Agri-tainment is another source of income that has been a real savior."



The Milburn family (from left to right, Nathan, Melinda, Evan, David, John, and Jay) is currently focused on retail sales and agri-tainment, and plans to be out of the wholesale business entirely in a few years.

But make no mistake about it, the Milburns are farmers, first and foremost. That's pretty obvious when you consider they're farming land that they could sell for upwards of

\$50,000 an acre for residential development. So while they have downsized, they have also diversified, adding many minor crops. Evan has researched seedless table grapes, and they plan to become the first table grape growers in the area. "We don't like competition," explains Evan. It's that willingness to learn, to try new things, to strive to be unique, that will likely keep the Milburns successful for another century. The bumper sticker on

Nathan's pickup puts it succinctly: "Born To Farm." ●

E-mail questions or comments about this article to [daddy@meistermedia.com](mailto:daddy@meistermedia.com).

## This Month In American Fruit Grower History

### May

**2003 Crushing Blow** The Washington Apple Commission's marketing assessments are ruled unconstitutional.

**2000 Sharpened Scouting** AFG issues a special report on the outbreak of the glassy-winger sharpshooter.

**1998 Get Involved** AFG launches a Call to Action on the Food Quality Protection Act.

**1995 Golden Apples** The California Apple Commission is formed, and Pink Lady arrives in the U.S.

**1984 Grape Expectations** AFG publishes its first Vine Lines column, written by Anthony Debevc of Chalet Debonne Vineyards in Madison, OH.

**1975 Leading The Way** The California Association of Winegrape Growers is formed.

**1974 Blue Skies** New research and production methods have led to a booming blueberry industry in Michigan.

**1970 Apple Giant** The National Apple Institute and International Apple Association merge to form the International Apple Institute, today known as USAApple.

**1968 Berry Good Picking** Engineers release the first prototype of a mechanical strawberry harvester.

**1960 Is The Governor Next?** An AFG interview with California Gov. Pat Brown discusses bargaining, marketing, and labor issues.

**1958 Do It Yourself** John Bell of Mossley Orchard, IL, is one of the first growers to develop pick-your-own sales.

**1955 Smart Advice** At the Pennsylvania State Horticultural Association Annual Meeting, John Baugher of Adams County Nursery says the industry should not move fully into dwarf trees until they know the rootstocks can perform under various conditions.

**1953 Managed Crop** A series of articles highlights how growth regulators are being used on different crops.

**1947 Keep Them Happy** Legendary Orondo, WA, apple grower Grady Auvil writes an article on providing housing for his workers.

**1943 Extra Points** Ohio State football coach Paul Brown discusses the need for growers to train younger men and women on how to work at the farm when their workers go to war.

**1941 Help From Above** Irving Krick of the California Institute of Technology, famous for modernizing the science of weather forecasting, analyzes the effects of weather on fruit growing.

**1926 Keep Cool** Precooling can lead to longer-lasting fresh fruit.

**1914 Have Mail, Will Travel** An article discusses how growers can use business letters to sell produce.