

Iceland

My name is Leif Blomqvist and I'm the owner and founder of Blomqvist nursery. This nursery is located in the middle part of Finland, about 500 km north of Helsinki.

I started when I was only 19 years old with a berry-farm. We grew strawberries, raspberries and black-currants.

Few years later I started to produce plants of these berries, mostly Öjebyn Blackcurrents. In the beginning I sold them bare-rooted on open markets from my old Ford Taunus Car.

At this time I also got my gardener education and studied one more year to nursery-gardener. I got mostly of my education in Rovaniemi. Because Rovaniemi gardener school is located almost on the arctic circle, everyday talk was about winter hardiness and how we can help different trees and shrubs to survive.

This was in the middle part of 1980. I have always been interested in berries but now I also have find how interesting fruits can be. Because we live so fare north, it is quite a challenge to work with apples, cherries, plums and pears. In fact we are less then 500 km from the arctic circle... Those days we did not have a lot of apple-varieties in our gardencenters and nurseries in Finland, not even in south of Finland. In the middle part of Finland we had only about 5-10 different varieties. Nurseryowners was just lazy and dont wanted to have too meny varieties in production.

I thought that this is a poor, vey poor situation. I heard that there was so many more varieties in Finland before, and many of those were very winter-hardy varieties. At the end of the 1800:th century, the famous Pomologist Alexandra Smirnoff wrote about hundreds and hundreds of apple-varieties in her and Dr Eneroths book "*Handbok i Svensk pomologi*."

So why did we have so many winter-hardy apple-varieties in Finland then, compared to many other countries?

One reason is because Finland was a part o Russia for about 100 years, and we got many good and winter-hardy varieties from there. Many of those varieties came thru "Regels nursery" in Viborg. Today city of Viborg belongs to Russia, and Regels nursery does not exist any more, but during their most successful time, the end of the 1800 century to the beginning of the 1900- century, we got many good varieties thru them to Finland. For example many of Professor Mitschurins varieties arrived to Finland thru this nursery. Still Russia is like a goldmine of interesting fruits and berries, and today when it is more open, it gives us possibilities to find really interesting and winter-hardy varieties from there. For example there are an interesting collection of apple-varieties which are highly resistant to *Venturia oaequalis*.

With help of two other enthusiastic nursery-owners in Finland, Mr Anssi Krannila and Timo Viertamo, I was able to find more then 120 different varieties of these old applesvarietyts. These were winter-hardy enough for our climate in middle and north of Finland. The

knowledge of those varieties was not very good, so I decided to plant a field to test them. I got advices from Horticultural reacerst station In Piikkiö and planted 2 pc of 100 varieties between 1986 and 1990. The project got some finical help from the European community. From this testified we learned a lot of these old apple-varieties, not only about winter-hardiness, but also about how soon they give their first harvest, how easy they get different kinds of diocesess and more.

But there was also another way in which we got many winter-hardy and interesting varieties:

After a while we become well known, much because of the project with the testified of old russian apple-varieties, and people started to inform us about old, good varieties in their home gardens. Some of them was really interesting. Within a year or two we found all kinds of varieties from a famous nursery near Vasa in Finland. This nursery was well known around the whole country for it's own apple-varieties. The name of the nursery was Syrins Nursery, and Syrin had his most important period from 1925 to 1950. I know he even exported to Iceland!

Already from the beginning I wanted to write a book about these old apple-varieties and how to grow them in northern and cold places. Our testfield helped me much when I wrote my first book, "*Äpplen i Norr*". The title means "Apples in North" in english. This book became very popular, because no other book like this existed before, telling about winter-hardy apple-varieties and how to grow them successfully in our cold climate.

Today our nursery have in our program about 170 different apples, plums, cherrys and pears. All these are winter-hardy enough for our climate where our nursery is located. We have also a number of test-varieties , not ready to introduce yet.

We have had, and have, a very different bouquet of fruit-varieties in Finland compared to our neighbor Sweden, even if it is only 75 km across the gulf of Bothnia. But that can be explain by the Russian time in our history. Also we have several nurseries in the middle and north part of our country interested in winter-hardy varieties. Sweden does not have many nurseries in the north. Most of the Swedish varieties arrived from western europe and like I said before, many of ours from Russia.

Before I introduced our winter-hardy varieties in northern Sweden, they sold very few varieties, hardly more then 3-5 different. so when I introduced these big number of winter-hardy varieties, every newspaper in northern Sweden wrote about the new possibilities for homegardenders in Northern Sweden. One paper wrote that now a new and interesting world have opened for home-gardeners in the north.

My time is almost over but I just have to tell you a nice story from the time when our varieties arrived to Sweden:

We sold 3 of our most winter-hardy varieties to Malmbergen, Kiruna. That is a very cold place in north Sweden, where not very much grow at all.

One older man and his wife wanted to try apple trees in their garden and bought them from us. The trees arrived with bus-transport all the way from Finland. After planting, their neighbors started to laugh and make fun of them because everybody knew it is impossible to plant apple trees in the north of Sweden, Lappland.

A few years later I met the old couple and they told me what had happened to their apple trees. Now the neighbors have stopped laughing, they have become **silent** and jealous instead because now they can see all the beautiful apples growing in our garden!