Liberty- and Freedom-source apple seedlings

Blackford Valley Farm | Wildlife planting guide

This guide covers both Liberty- and Freedom-source seed lots. These trees grow from seed, so they are not grafted Liberty or Freedom apples. Their pollen parents, fruit traits, disease resistance, and harvest timing vary; the named cultivars' traits cannot be promised for their offspring.

Intended use

These seedlings are grown for **wildlife food and attracting deer**, especially on hunting land. Their fruit may be small, tart, astringent, blemished, or otherwise less appealing to people than fruit from a selected grafted tree. Fruit size, flavor, yield, first-bearing age, and drop date are individual-seedling traits; there is no guarantee that these trees will match the fruit pictured or the named cultivar. If dependable eating quality is the goal, choose a grafted cultivar.

Choose a site

- **Sun and soil:** Give trees full sun for strong fruiting and **well-drained soil**. Avoid low spots that hold water; water new trees during dry spells and maintain a grass-free area near the trunk.
- **Space: These are full-size seedling apples**, without a dwarfing rootstock. Allow room for a broad crown; roughly 25–35 feet of initial spacing is a practical starting point if trees will grow freely, with pruning or thinning as they mature.
- **Climate:** Choose a planting site that suits the local hardiness zone. A seed label alone does not prove the seedlings will tolerate every Iowa winter; the unknown pollen parent and seed origin matter.

Soil, roots, and water

NC State gives a general fruit-tree target of **pH 6.0-6.5**; University of Georgia's apple guidance is near **6.5**. These are soil-test discussion targets, not measured optima for Liberty- or Freedom-source seedlings. Strongly acidic or basic soil can limit nutrient availability; test before liming, acidifying, or adding fertilizer. Neither seed parent supplies a tested rootstock or guarantees scab resistance in the offspring.

Choose deep, moisture-retentive but **well-drained, penetrable soil**: Georgia favors sandy loam to sandy clay loam, not heavy compacted clay. Oregon State's general orchard benchmark is **at least 3 feet of penetrable soil**, not a measured root length or a tested requirement for this lot. Shallow rock, hardpan, compaction, or a high water table reduce usable rooting space. Avoid cultivation that damages surface roots. Water at planting, check beneath mulch frequently through the first growing seasons, and water slowly when the planted root zone starts drying. Wet the roots and surrounding soil without waterlogging, then let excess drain. Established trees need less frequent attention, but drought can still limit shoot growth and fruit development.

Waterlogging can suffocate roots, favor root-infecting pathogens, and cause tree death. Dependable moisture, suitable pH, and fertility support canopy growth, flower-bud formation, and developing apples, not predictable seedling fruit or yield. Excess nitrogen or heavy pruning promotes leafy growth at the expense of fruiting and tender shoots susceptible to fire blight. Wet foliage favors scab; irrigate soil rather than the canopy and retain airflow. Soil stress alone does not diagnose scab, rust, or fire blight.

Pollination and deer use

Plant at least two genetically different apples or compatible crabapples with overlapping bloom, preferably several; bees carry pollen between trees. Fruit set also depends on bloom weather and frost. The fallen apples may attract deer in late summer or fall and add to food available near a hunting area. The timing and size of the crop will only become clear when each seedling matures; fruit may fall before, during, or after the local hunting season. Deer visits also depend on other food and movement patterns, so no single tree guarantees deer at a stand. Observe productive trees and their fruit-drop windows before deciding which to favor or propagate.

Plant your potted seedling

We sell and recommend **potted seedlings**. Our planting method requires a **square hole, not a round one**. A wider hole is preferred, not required; it must fit the root ball without squeezing it. Dig no deeper than the root ball in its pot, and shallower as needed to leave the **top of the root ball slightly above surrounding ground level**. Rest it on firm soil so it does not settle too deep. Water the pot before removal; support the root ball, not the stem, and keep it together. Check for circling roots rather than forcing a root-bound ball into the hole. Backfill around the sides with native soil, taper soil to cover exposed side roots, and water thoroughly. Keep the root flare exposed; do not pile soil or mulch over the ball's top or against the trunk. Check both the root ball and nearby soil for moisture while roots establish.

Protect young trees

A well-staked, ventilated **5–6-foot tree tube** or effective tall cage is close to essential where deer browse. Deer can destroy shoots, and **rabbits, mice, and voles** can girdle a young stem and kill it. Seat and secure the tube bottom; check it for tunneling or nests, keep weeds and tall grass back, and expand or remove the guard as the crown and trunk grow. The tube can help a seedling get above browse height, but it needs maintenance. Watch for apple scab, cedar-apple rust, and fire blight. Disease resistance reported for the named grafted cultivar is not assured in a seedling.

Learn more

Use the soil-location map to screen survey pH layers, drainage, water storage, and rooting restrictions where recorded. Survey estimates are not a soil test or field inspection of the planting spot. Verify actual depth and seasonal wetness and test before amendments. The map does not measure current moisture or predict fruit yield.

- NC State Extension: general fruit-tree pH, drainage, roots, and disease care
- University of Georgia Extension: apple pH, soil texture, and drainage
- Oregon State Extension: general orchard soil-depth benchmark
- NC State Extension: soil depth, aeration, pH, and nutrient availability
- University of Minnesota Extension: establishment watering and mulch
- University of Minnesota Extension: growing apples and ongoing care
- Penn State Extension: why fruit trees grown from seed vary
- University of Minnesota Extension: rootstocks, tree size, and fruiting
- Penn State Extension: scab resistance of the named grafted cultivars
- Penn State Extension: deer and fallen orchard fruit
- Penn State Extension: tree shelters and rodent exclusion