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According to the CDC, the U.S. is seeing a rise in the number of measles cases, with 92 percent involving non-vaccinated children. Do you believe all children should be required to be vaccinated?

Please select one:

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9/23/2013 9:29:00 AM

**Big Woods Orchard producing big apples**

By Craig Moorhead  
Government/Sports  
Writer

At Big Woods Orchard last week, dwarf apple trees hung heavy with ripening fruit. The earliest variety was already reaching its bright-red peak.

"It's kind of neat when you drive down here," Tom Wunderlich said, "just to look at all those apples."

Wunderlich began planting apple trees here near the South Fork of the Root River in 1999, gradually building his inventory to 2,000 trees covering six acres. It's a sizable operation, but still on the small side as commercial orchards go.

"This is a drop in the bucket," Wunderlich noted. "Some of those orchards over towards Centerville (Wisconsin) have 60,000, 70,000 trees."

In the apple business, there are more trees per acre now than there used to be, because commercial growers now favor dwarf varieties. Wunderlich said the reasons are many, but revolve around easier management. Pruning, spraying and picking are all simplified with smaller trees.

Big Woods Orchard takes its name from the area it's located in, where a series of deep valleys intersect the landscape.

"I bought the land in 1989," Wunderlich said. "A friend said, 'You should put apple trees up here,' so I decided to plant 100 trees in five varieties. Back then, I didn't have a fence



Tom Wunderlich shows off one of his beautiful red, ripe Zestar apples. CRAIG MOORHEAD/BLUFF COUNTRY READER



Tom Wunderlich stands next to a line of dwarf apple trees in his orchard in the Big Woods. CRAIG MOORHEAD/BLUFF COUNTRY READER

**Upcoming pie contest in Mabel showcases delicious fruit**

Big Woods Orchard will be sponsoring an apple pie contest at the Simple Living Farmers Market in Mabel on Saturday, Oct. 5, beginning at 9 a.m.

Bring a home-baked pie to the market tent between 8:30 and 9 a.m. on Oct. 5. One must first register for the contest by calling Becky Selness at (507) 493-5092 or emailing her at selness@mabeltel.coop. The contest is limited to the first 15 entries.

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around the orchard. It was just crazy. I tried all kinds of deer repellent, but they were eating me out of house and home."

The current fence seems to do the trick. At 10-feet tall, topped with two strands of non-electric high tensile wire, it appears to have been built to exclude giants.

A beekeeper from Lanesboro provides hives for pollination. "His honey won first place at the state fair," Wunderlich said. "His name is Michael Gjere. I pay him a little bit to keep bees here, and he gives me more honey than I know what to do with."

Varieties now include Sweet Tango, Haralson, Cortland, Fireside, McIntosh, Honeycrisp and Zestar, some of which were developed at the University of Minnesota. Big Woods apples can be found at the Winona Farmers' Market and the Simple Living Farmers Market in Mabel.

Wunderlich and orchard manager Wayne Austin were loading bags of plump Zestar apples into wooden boxes, bound for Winona. "These are my first apple," Wunderlich said. "They're a cross between a Honeycrisp and a McIntosh. "They're getting to be very popular with our customers.

"The taste of a Minnesota, Wisconsin or Michigan apple is different from those grown elsewhere. If you ever get a Washington Honeycrisp, you'll see what I mean. It doesn't taste anything like ours. You can definitely tell the difference," Wunderlich explained. "Washington State has more apples, but because of our climate, maybe our soils, the flavor is different.

"We have our swings of cold/warm weather. There's also the amount of sunshine. That influences apples. Sun exposure is good. Our trees are sited to take advantage of a southeastern exposure," he continued.

"We don't just pick the whole tree. We'll go through a variety two to three times and color-pick so we know we're taking the ripest ones."

Wunderlich also said that apples tend to be bi-annual. "They'll bear every other year," he said. "By thinning, we kind of trick the tree into producing every year."

"We hand-thin in June," Austin added. "It's a lot of hand work... but by taking some off you get a lot nicer apple, a bigger apple."

Wunderlich grinned. "It's a labor of love, or as my wife says, expensive therapy."

He also noted that the Sweet Tango is another University of Minnesota apple. "It's a 'club' apple," he said. "You have to sign a contract to only grow for commercial sale. You can't wholesale it to somebody else. It basically goes directly to an apple stand or a grocery store. It's a Minnesota-only variety. No Wisconsin growers can have it."

Out among the trees, Wunderlich inspected a new row of Zestar growing on dwarf rootstock. The trees were still small, but some were loaded with very large apples. Branches bent low under the weight.

"Zestar makes a good apple pie," he noted. "It does bake up well, but it's also a very good fresh eating variety. As one of the earliest fall apples, it has that crisp texture that summer apples lack. It has a full, sweet-tart flavor."

Wunderlich does not offer public picking, but he does allow a few people to come in and pick up apples when he and Austin are done picking. "You can use them (drops) for juice, or can them for pie filling," he said.

Wunderlich is sponsoring apple pie baking contests at both farmers' markets this fall. (See sidebar). "Down here, it seems like everybody knows how to bake a good apple pie," he chuckled.

"I work in Winona, but I'd like to live here. If I can retire in a couple of years this is where we'll be. This place gives peace of mind. My wife says, 'We may never hit the lottery, but we've got it here,'" Wunderlich concluded. "You should see this valley when the fall color starts. Or when the first snow falls. It's pretty neat down here."

Limit one pie per person.

Cash prizes will be awarded to the best three pies with first place receiving \$100; second place receiving \$50 and third place receiving \$25.

The Simple Living Farmers Market is located one-quarter mile west of Mabel on Highway 44. The Market is open from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. every Saturday through Oct. 15.



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