

Flavour and colour first in Nelson orchardist's new varieties



HELEN MURDOCH/FAIRFAX NZ

Orchardist and plant breeder Bill Lynch with a variety of his apples which will be trialed in China this year.

Bill Lynch has spent 25 years breeding old-fashioned flavour and hot colour back into apples. Now marketers are knocking at his Nelson door.

"I wanted to re-create the flavour of 30 or 40 years ago. There are some excellent new varieties available now, but too many average tasting apples on the market."

While flavour came first for the Redwood Valley orchardist he wanted to also create a bright red colour to attract shoppers and build an additional commercial point of difference for growers.



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Redwood Valley orchardist and plant breeder Bill Lynch points out his picks among the new variety he has developed for flavour and colour.

Using the now obsolete heritage royal gala plus cox's orange and braeburn varieties as a genetic base, Lynch developed two sister varieties through years of exhaustive testing.

The resulting hot pink Berica and red-pink Mondaju not only taste fantastic but look good in the fruit bowl, he said.

A bite on an early Berica revealed a crisp, crunchy apple full of flavour which smelt delicious.

But its creation came slowly.

Lynch said he started "tinkering around with plant breeding" in the footsteps of his father, a market gardener who also bred plants.

It took Lynch 20 years to narrow the thousand "semi-finalists" down to two contenders. "We cut a lot of firewood."

His one-man breeding programme's semi-commercial trials now cover five hectares, with additional commercial plantings across the family's 40ha orchard, which is managed by his son, Dan.

"I did all the propagating, nursery work and grafting and walked kilometres gazing at the trees for that elusive point of difference.

"We are not into genetic modification. It's just been clean air, climate, my grafting knife and my transistor radio - I've been having a ball."

Lynch said he achieved the flavour first, his main priority. "Putting the colour there was a gift of nature."

But his work is not over. Finalising plant patents over the two breeds is underway.

And his challenge is now to select a licensee to manage and market the varieties to selected growers and consumers.

This would give the orchardists the right to plant and commercially produce the apples and allow global expansion.

Over time Lynch should see a return to cover his years of development, which he carried out under the umbrella of his company Fashion Foods.

"It's exciting to create something special. The biggest pay-back will be creating something of real value to the industry and fruit lovers."

Lynch doubted there were other individual apple breeders in the country. The competition from multi-million dollar entities, such as NZ's PREVAR, the grower compulsory joint-venture with Australia and Food Research, was tough competition.

He and his wife Erica had toured the world researching market needs and what was available, but saw nothing which compared to his apples flavour and colour, he said.

Usually plant breeders tested their product in the market. But in this case marketers were coming to Lynch from the US, South America, Europe and New Zealand.

Customer feedback trials were being held in China this year. "They are excited about these varieties and keen to secure large volumes," Lynch said.

Commercial packhouse and storage trials were carried out last year.

Lynch said his varieties were also grower-friendly.

"The trees behave superbly with strong return crops, they have minimal cosmetic defects, the colour is spectacular and they are easy to pick, grow and prune.

"I believe they are destined to be a global sensation."

- Stuff