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In one of the surest signs of the coming of autumn, Jeff McDonald, an employee at Apple Annie Orchard in Brentwood, picks ripened apples in the early season of picking on the Seacoast.

Photo by Jamie Cohen

Orchards open with apples, hayrides and more

By Emily Quirk
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HOME

Whether it's the crisp touch of autumn air or the crunching sound of leaves below your feet, it is officially the start of fall and, of course, apple season.

Many Seacoast apple orchards opened for picking recently with juicy McIntosh and anticipate Cortlands popping up soon. The first bite into a fresh apple is representative of the fall season, said Charles Pratt, owner of Apple Annie in Brentwood.

"Orchards are a beautiful place, and it's a wonderful experience to do with your children so they see where apples come from," Pratt said. "Nothing beats the sensation of picking the first apple of the season."

Apple Annie has been in operation since the early 1980s, but an orchard in one form or another for nearly 30 years. Pratt said a majority of the orchard's 200 trees were planted in the 1930s and have been producing a fruitful bounty ever since.

Pratt said the apple season usually starts the last week in August or the first week in September each year with the McIntosh, then come Cortlands, and then Wagner and Liberty apples. Popular late bloomers include Rome, Gala, Red Delicious, Granny Smith and Paula Red. The apple season usually lasts until the end of October.

"We've had people calling already saying, 'When are the Cortlands going to be ready?'" he said. "I like all apples, so it's hard for me to pick, but a good apple will be juicy and should give you some resistance. All apples as they ripen get sweeter and not as hard."

Mike Lynch, farm manager for DeMeritt Hill Farm in Lee, suggests apple pickers call before stopping by for the most up-to-date picking conditions.

DeMeritt Hill Farm, owned by Meg and Roy Wilson since 1992, is open for the season and has been in full swing.

"Currently, we are picking McIntosh and next week we'll be picking Cortlands," Lynch said. "Every two or three days, there's a different variety for picking. So far, we have a good crop and we hope for a great season."

DeMeritt Hill Farm has 25 different varieties of apples and caters to families.



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Pickers sit among straws of hay as they ride a tractor out to the orchards best trees.

"We have a lot of fun activities for the kids," he said. "They get to see the entire farm and have the complete farm experience."

When families are finished picking apples, kids can stop at the petting zoo or the children's play area. The last three weekends of October, the farm offers Halloween activities such as the enchanted hayrides with characters such as Cinderella and Harry Potter. The farm has been doing the enchanted hayride for five seasons, and they've become so popular they are now requesting customers make reservations for the rides that leave every 30 minutes.

DeMeritt Farm isn't alone. Applecrest Farm Orchards in Hampton Falls has also established a "harvest experience."

For nearly 20 years, the farm, owned by Peter and Linda Wagner, has been offering the Fall Harvest festivals each weekend in autumn until Halloween. In addition to apple picking, families can listen to bluegrass music, go on a horse-drawn hayride, make their own scarecrow, and participate in an old-fashioned corn roast, cider pressing, and visit the petting zoo.

The orchard also has storybook hayrides featuring members of the Winnacunnet Drama Club acting out scenes from various nursery rhymes during the last two weekends in October.

"People spend the whole day here," Peter Wagner said. "It's an old-fashioned day of family fun. You spend an entire day and not spend a lot of money."

Wagner said apple pickers come from as far away as New York and Rhode Island to visit the orchard. Applecrest attracts between 5,000 and 10,000 people a month, he said.

Although Pine View Orchard in Berwick, Maine, has only been in the apple orchard business for eight years, it's well on its way to becoming a premier site for apple picking with its mountainous views.

"We have a spot set up on a hill in Berwick that faces toward Rochester, and you see all the mountains in the distance," owner Roger Cantin said. "We see a lot of families and they take a lot of pictures while apple picking. It's been growing."

The orchard has approximately 600 trees, and customers are invited to pick their own apples. Cantin sells apples, T-shirts and beverages from the orchard's garage.



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