

Reinette Simirenko? Your Guess is as Good as Mine

October, 1988 Reinette Simirenko has recently come into focus as a Northern answer to the almost subtropical Granny Smith. It sports a similar coat in whitish dotted designer's green but requires from four to six weeks less to picking maturity. In other characteristics the two are neither unlike nor identical. Thirty years ago when my variety collecting urge was at its peak, I managed to obtain scions of the Reinette Simirenko and other varieties from Transylvania, Count Dracula's homeland. The friend of a friend of a neighbor, refugee from behind the Iron Curtain worked there at an experiment station. I have since compared the apple with the descriptions given by older and modern authorities and am satisfied that it is true to name. It was distributed to many friends in NAFEX and eventually reached the USDA Germ Plasm Inventory between 1977 and 1981.

Origin and early history of Reinette Simirenko are uncertain. The Ukrainian pomologist Leo Simirenko named it in honor of his father, Platon Simirenko, towards the close of the last century. There is a Russian maxim never to trust a man whose name ends in "enko". While Leo is straightforward about the uncertain origin of the apple it was his grandson Alex in the USA who created the myth that his granddad had originated it. Alex' father Vladomir, a horticulturist and Ukrainian patriot in Stalin's time vanished into the Gulag after declaring Michurin a liar. Alex and his mother fled the Ukraine after it had been liberated by the Germans in WW 2 and made their way through Germany to the USA. Eventually, he became professor of history at Penn State University and died in 1979.

His granddad had distanced himself from claiming breeder's rights in his work Pomologia where he wrote about the Reinette Simirenko: "It may well be an old variety that was sent to me from a Western country and which is doing well under our conditions. It also might have come from an accidental seed that sprouted on the farm of my father who was a fruit lover. However, in the opinion of Mr. Clausen, head gardener of the Nikitsky Gardens, Reinette Simirenko and Zelenka Wuda are the same variety". (Nikitsky Gardens near Yalta is Russia's leading horticultural research station, with currently over 500 employees and about 700 acres.)

Leo Simirenko was born in 1855 into a well-to-do Ukrainian family who had bought itself out of serfdom. He studied Natural Sciences and Economics at the University of Odessa and, participating in student unrests against the Czar, was arrested three times and finally exiled to Siberia in 1879. Within three years he had worked his way up to become head gardener of the penal institution with enough freedom to experiment and research the hardiness of fruit trees and other plants. When he was released in 1887 he started a fruit tree nursery in Mleev, his native village near Kiev. Gravitating to the West he began to correspond with French, German and Belgian pomologists, contributing to such leading journals as REVUE HORTICOLE and GAUCHER'S OBSTBAUM

ZUECHTER. A variety orchard was established with scion contributions from his many contacts. At the Congres Horticole in 1894 he was made an honorary member and gradually gained European prominence as the leading Russian pomologist. His nursery grew to become the largest in Russia, listing 1,300 varieties for sale in 1901 and 2,390 varieties in 1912.

For years he had worked on a three volume descriptive work on tree fruits, his Pomologia. Just when, in 1920, he put the final touches on it, he was declared an enemy of the people because of his contacts with the West and gunned down by a Soviet firing squad. His daughter hid the manuscript during Stalin's rule and later willed it to the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences which published it in 1961 and again in 1972. In the publication Leo Simirenko's death was blamed on an "accident".

The apple he named is grown widely in the milder regions of Russia, from the Ukraine to Central Asia and is one of the important winter apples. Simirenko's dream to cross it with hardier native varieties never materialized. His fellow pomologist Michurin, also born in 1855 but embracing the Soviet ideology (which included belief in the heredity of acquired characters), used the Reinette Simirenko in many of his over 300 recorded crosses but I personally don't know that any of them are in production.

The apple which Clausen called Zelenka Wuda was first pictured and described by William Coxe at Philadelphia in 1817 under the name Woods Greening. He wrote "The apple is of medium size - the colour a pale green - the form resembling a Newton Pippin, but more pointed at the blossom end - the skin smooth, the flesh white, juicy and sprightly - an excellent winter fruit - the stem is thick and short, and deeply planted - the crown hollow; a very abundant bearer. It was first cultivated by a family in the county of Burlington New Jersey, from whom it derived its name - it is sometimes called Coate's Greening, from another family in the same county."

Later pomologists added the synonyms Cooke's Greening and Osthine. Emmons, Downing, Elliott, Warder have it in their fruit books and J.J. Thomas, probably the most discerning one in the fraternity, calls its flavour "most agreeable". In 1903 the Michigan pomologist T.T. Lyons was engaged in a nomenclature clean-up for APS and officialized the name to Woods Greening.

As Woods Greening became better known and distributed in Europe, it was translated into French as Reinette Verte Incomparable, into German as Wood's Gruenling and into Russian as Zelenka Wuda. In England the 1842 inventory of the London Horticultural Society listed Woods Greening as growing in their apple collection. Also in 1842 the Austrian pomologist Liegel lists Woodgrening (sic) among 22 other American apples in the variety orchard of the King of Bavaria. In 1859/60 there was an elaborate and most competent description and illustration by Overdieck who grew, observed and propagated Wood's Gruenling for many years in his famous nursery near Hannover, Germany. He included it in his pomological testament of 1881 among the fifty best varieties for drier soils. Other European pomologists such as Hogg, Scott, Mas, Mathieu and O. Thomas list it but, after about 1895, it seems to have vanished - or was there just a switch of names?

The identification of Reinette Simirenko and Woods Greening as one and the same variety is interfered with by a third variety, the Yorkshire Greening. It was first described by Forsyth in 1802 and differs from Woods Greening in several respects. Grown in North America by 1835 it was subsequently described by Downing, Elliott and J.J. Thomas. The problem stems from the inconvenient fact that from early on both varieties were distributed under the identical synonym of Coate's or Coates' Greening. This case of easily mistaken identities eventually multiplied because the term Greening was often carelessly, ignorantly or even deceptively applied to any of a dozen varieties grown in North America in the 19th Century, all originally named "so-and-so" Greening.

Of the enclosed illustrations by pomological authorities, four are of Reinette Simirenko, four of Woods Greening. A cross section of Yorkshire Greening is not shown because it is outside the relative congruence of the eight others. Allowing for natural variations of specimens, artists, and media would you say that they represent the same variety or can you recognize two distinct varieties? (I vote for Chemical Fingerprinting.)

Key: Reinette Simirenko #4, 6, 7, 8. Woods Greening: #1, 2, 3, 5.