

DOWN AT THE ORCHARD THE APPLE TREES BLOOM

It's Michigan apple blossom time, which is kind of like prom time for apple trees — time to dress up in something pretty.

By mid-May, most of the state's 8.5 million apple trees start to bloom — so beautifully it would be impossible to pick a queen!

But it was only May 3, so the Yak headed to Erie Orchard and Cider Mill, in the state's southeast corner, where the weather is a little warmer than at orchards farther north.

The prom had started early: Erie's trees were bursting with color — thousands of bright pink buds and pink-and-white flowers that would be gone in a week, not to return until prom time next year.

Last year, Erie started giving spring tours of its orchard in addition to the fall tours it and many other apple orchards traditionally offer.

"We were the only ones who saw this beautiful place in the spring, so I opened it up," said Steve Elzinga, the orchard's owner.

What a great idea! It was sunny and chilly — about 55 degrees — at 10 a.m. when the Yak arrived. Elzinga was sitting on his tractor,



which was hitched to a farm wagon filled with 12 excited Toledo preschoolers and their parents. The prom limousine! The Yak jumped aboard, plopping down on a bale of hay for the quarter-mile ride to the orchard.

There were eight varieties of apple trees: Ida red, Paula red, McIntosh, Red and Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Northern Spy and Jonathan. They all looked alike and had begun to pop their buds. But only the Paula reds were in full bloom — they will ripen first, in mid-August. Elzinga snapped a cluster of blossoms from a Northern Spy. It had five flowers.

"There's always a king — a first, largest bud — and it's usually in the middle," he said. "The king opens first."

Each blossom can produce an apple. But if they all did, the tree wouldn't have enough energy left to set new buds in August, and there wouldn't be any apples next year. So farmers spray their trees with a hormone solution that kills all but the king in each cluster.

No buds, no spring prom.

By Patricia Charget



Apples orchards run the length of Michigan's fruit belt, which stretches from the state's southwest corner all the way to Traverse City. Southeast Michigan is known for apple orchards, too. To find an orchard near you, visit www.michiganapples.com.

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