

Head to the Hills and Go Apple Picking

by Rachel Roberts Quartarone

Sunshine, vivid colors and crisp mountain air – it’s no wonder Atlantans flock to the hills of North Georgia each fall for the great outdoors. The area is known for its apple picking, along with related autumnal activities like pumpkin patches, corn mazes, leaf watching and harvest festivals. Apples are at their prime in September and October when the weather is perfect for strolling through orchards and plucking fruit fresh from the trees. Children love picking and filling their bags, while doing a little snacking along the way. Apple picking is a great way to get some exercise and show your kids that food does indeed grow on trees.

Ellijay (and Gilmer County), located about 90 minutes north of Atlanta, is known as “Georgia’s Apple Capital.” The region produces 600,000 bushels of apples each year. Apple houses and stands line the roads, but only a few allow you to pick your own.

When to Go

Depending on the variety, apples are harvested as late as November. Popular varieties include Gala, Golden Delicious, Pink Lady, Rome Beauty, Arkansas Black and Winesap. Call ahead before you go to make sure your favorite is in season.

If you’re not a fan of crowds, make your trip before pumpkin and festival season starts. Traffic jams on Highway 52 near Ellijay are common during October’s peak leaf-watching weekends and during Ellijay’s Georgia Apple Festival (georgiaapplefestival.org), which takes place the second and third weekends of October. If you do plan a visit on an October weekend, arrive early for smaller crowds. The orchards tend to be the busiest in the afternoons.



Mercier Orchards

Where to Go

■ **B.J. Reece Apple House:** 9131 Hwy. 52 East, Ellijay; 706-276-3048; reeceorchards.com

Best for: Weekend activities, good value, weekday “U-pick” availability

This popular apple house is available for “U-pick” every day from the first weekend in September until October 31 – sometimes even into November, depending on availability. The peak of apple season is from mid-September to early October. Later in the season, you’ll find less variety. However, a wide assortment of bagged apples is available in the Apple House market. You can even try a taste of each apple in season to find your favorite. To pick your own, simply pay the \$2 orchard entrance fee and buy a bag to fill with apples. Prices range from \$5 for a half-peck to \$14 for a half-bushel.

On weekends, kids will enjoy a petting zoo, hayride and apple shooting cannon – each available for an additional fee. Don’t leave without stopping by the Apple House for some apple treats like fresh cider, fried apple pies, apple bread and cider doughnuts.

■ **Hillcrest Orchards:** 9696 Hwy. 52 East, Ellijay; 706-273-3838; hillcrestorchards.net

Best for: Weekend activities, kid-friendly dwarf trees, petting zoo (open daily)

One of the busiest orchards along Highway 52, Hillcrest is in full festival mode during September and October during its “Apple Pickin’ Jubilee.” While the market and petting zoo are open daily, the only time for self-picking is during the jubilee, which runs the last three weekends in September and every weekend in October. For \$6, you gain entrance to all the festivities, including wagon rides, cow milking, pig races, apple bobbing and live entertainment. Entrance to the petting zoo is extra. There’s also a wide variety of delicious food to sample. From boiled peanuts and homemade ice cream to hot dogs and fried apple fritters, you won’t go hungry here.

Seven varieties of apples are available to pick. Bags cost \$6 for a half-peck, \$9 for a peck and \$14 for a half-bushel. Small children will especially enjoy picking from Hillcrest’s dwarf trees with apples hanging well within reach.



■ **Mercier Orchards:** 8660 Blue Ridge Dr. (Hwy. 5), Blue Ridge; 706-632-3411; mercier-orchards.com

Best for: Gimmick-free apple picking, knowledgeable staff, wide variety of apples

Located in nearby Blue Ridge, about 17 miles from Ellijay, this picturesque orchard is the largest in the state. Family owned for over 60 years, the growers take great pride in their green growing practices and the 50 varieties of apples they produce each year. Mercier also grows blueberries and strawberries during the summer months, and the market and deli are open year-round.

Do-it-yourself apple picking is on the weekends through late October, depending on availability. The apple adventure starts with a tractor ride to the orchards and a brief talk about Mercier’s history. Helpful orchard staff will point you to the self-pick varieties, where you can fill your bag with any combination. Prices are \$6 for a half-peck and \$12 for a peck. On your way out, be sure to pick up some hot apple pies, famous in these parts.