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Can Apples Reign over the Darjeeling Hills? Climate Change and the Future of Temperate Fruits in North Bengal Hills

Anwesha Das[1], Arju Ali Khan[2], Arindam Das[3]*, Debarpita Datta Ray[4]

[1]Department of Agriculture, Birangana Sati Sadhani Rajyik Viswavidyalaya, Golaghat, Assam, 785621, India
[2]Department of Food Processing Industries & Horticulture, Bankura, West Bengal, 722101, India
[3]Department of Vegetable and Spice Crops, Uttar Banga Krishi Viswavidyalaya, Pundibari, West Bengal, 736164, India
[4]Department of Genetics and Plant Breeding, Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswavidyalaya, Mohanpur, West Bengal, 741221, India

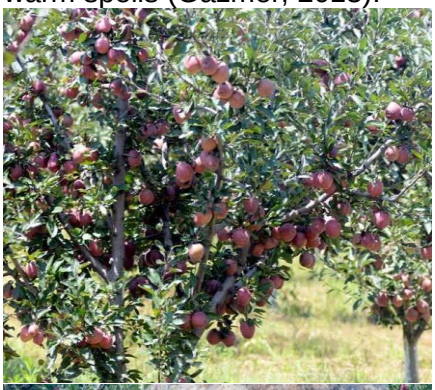
arindamdas@ubkv.ac.in

People have long imagined the cool slopes and misty mornings of Darjeeling: tea gardens woven across steep ridges, backyard terraces with cardamom and oranges, and the tantalizing prospect of apples, at least in trial plots. However, the question shifts from romantic to pragmatic as the climate warms: will apples, a traditional temperate fruit that depends on a consistently cold winter, make resurgence in Darjeeling? The short answer is: perhaps, but only if varieties are carefully chosen, management is astute, and scale and quality expectations are reasonable. To properly break dormancy, produce an even budbreak, and set fruit reliably the following spring, most apple varieties require a specific number of "chill hours"—cumulative hours below a threshold temperature during the winter. Trees may exhibit uneven or delayed flowering, fewer blossoms, poor fruit set, and decreased fruit colour and storage life if winters get too mild. Global analyses demonstrate that temperate fruit production is already being impacted by declining winter chill in many parts of the world, and that predicted warming will exacerbate the issue in many existing apple-growing zones (Salama et al., 2021).

Climate change and the Himalayas

Over the past few decades, scientists have observed slight but significant temperature increases and altered rainfall patterns throughout the Indian Himalayan region. Growers are already being encouraged by those changes to move apple plantings uphill, where winter temperatures are still lower. To capture the remaining chill that apples require, orchards that were formerly viable at 1,200–1,500 m are now being established at higher elevations, according to Himalayan states. A definite and quantifiable reaction to warming winters is this uphill shift (Sahu et al., 2020).

Microclimates in the Darjeeling district differ greatly from one ridge to the next due to the district's wide elevation range (many inhabited areas are between 600 and 2,200 m). Apple saplings from higher-altitude states have been tested by local horticulture departments, and media reports and small pilot plantings indicate that farmers and extension agents are interested. However, the winter chill needed by typical high-chill apple cultivars is probably absent from Darjeeling's lower foothills and many valley locations, and the situation may become more complicated due to an increase in winter rains or unexpected warm spells (Gazmer, 2013).



Phenology, Pollinators and Frost

Warming can alter the timing of flowering even in situations where the chill is just slightly sufficient. In temperate fruit orchards around the world, early warm snaps can cause premature bloom followed by destruc-

tive late frosts. Additionally, pollinators are sensitive; changes in the timing of blossoms may not correspond with bee activity, which can lead to pollination deficits and a decrease in fruit set (Noguer et al., 2023). To put it briefly, the issue is not just "not cold enough"; rather, it is a collection of biological and temporal inconsistencies that are exacerbated by climate variability.

i. Unpredictable Bloom and Frost Damage

Apple buds may break dormancy earlier than usual in warmer late winters. The delicate blossoms are easily killed, and a large portion of the crop for that year is lost if this is followed by an unanticipated cold snap or frost, which is typical in the foothills of the Himalayas. This "early bloom–late frost" mismatch has become a significant hazard in areas where apples have already moved uphill.

ii. Altered Flowering Synchrony

For cross-pollination, apples rely significantly on cultivars flowering at the same time. Fruit set can be decreased by reducing overlap caused by even small variations in bloom timing between varieties. This issue is often made worse by climate variability, which can result in inconsistent or staggered flowering within the same orchard.

iii. Pollinator Mismatches

Bees, in particular, are the primary insect pollinators of apples. Fruit set drastically decreases if pollinators are in short supply or not active during bloom, and climate change may change bee emergence or activity patterns. Concern over the "phenological mismatch" between crop flowering and pollinator presence is growing, according to studies conducted in temperate fruit systems across the globe.

iv. Disease and Pest Pressures

Warming and humidity encourage pests like borers and aphids, as well as fungal diseases like powdery mildew (*Podosphaera leucotricha*) and apple scab (*Venturia inaequalis*). More generations of insects may survive in areas where winter temperatures are too warm to control pest populations, putting more strain on orchards. For growers, these difficulties increase expenses and risks.

v. Fruit Quality and Marketability

Fruit colour and sugar buildup are also influenced by temperature. Warm nighttime temperatures tend to cause apples to have paler skins and worse storage quality. Even if yields are acceptable, this can directly lower the harvest's economic value in a market where consumers expect bright red or well-coloured fruit.

vi. Soil and Water Stress

In addition to temperature, shifting rainfall patterns also present risks. In hilly regions like Darjeeling, heavy rains exacerbate soil erosion, and dry spells necessitate irrigation infrastructure that many smallholders cannot afford. The stability of apple cultivation in marginal areas is further diminished by these stresses taken together.

Adaptation approaches for the orchard

Low-chill cultivars and rootstocks: In order to produce apples in milder winters, plant breeders have created and identified apple cultivars with lower chill requirements. Although there may be trade-offs in terms of flavour, storage, or market acceptance, these types can expand apple production into warmer, lower-elevation regions (Salama et al., 2021). Choosing a location and controlling the microclimate: Higher terraces, cold-air drainage locations, and north-facing slopes all help to retain chill. Trees can withstand stress by being shaded, mulched, and pruned carefully. Pollinator-friendly ways include several methods. For instance, when phenology changes, pollination deficits can be lessened by improving local bee habitat and planting hedgerows or cover crops at the right time to support pollinators. Pollinator-friendly methods: When phenology changes, pollination deficits can be lessened by improving local bee habitat and placing hedgerows or cover crops at the right time to support pollinators (Virkar et al., 2025). Instead of trying to grow large commercial apple blocks that require high and consistent chill, many smallholders will find it more sensible to grow improved citrus, temperate-adapted apples, or low-chill temperate fruits (such as some plums or peaches) on a small scale. Evaluations of temperate fruit adaptation place a strong emphasis on combining landscape-level choices with varietal selection (Salama et al., 2021).

So, can apples reign over?

If "reigning over" the North Bengal hills means expansive, high-quality apple orchards like those in Himachal Pradesh or Kashmir, then the answer is unlikely in the majority of Darjeeling unless orchards are moved to extremely cold, high elevations or cultivars specifically bred for low chill are used. Apples can be a part of Darjeeling's horticultural mosaic, though, if we're talking about small, thoughtfully placed plantings using low-chill cultivars, backed by good orchard practices and pollinator-friendly measures. This should be approached as a cautious experiment by farmers and extension services: start small, track yields

and flowering for a few years, and be ready to switch to other temperate or sub-tropical crops if the climate signal turns out to be unfavourable.

Conclusion

Apples offer value-added opportunities (storage, processing, agrotourism), as well as good prices, making them both culturally and economically appealing. However, any Darjeeling apple promotion should be based on sound local economics and trials. Research conducted over the last ten years has demonstrated both the potential (new niches at higher elevations, low-chill genetics) and the limitations (shrinking suitable zones under high-emissions scenarios). Darjeeling has the best chance of incorporating apples into its hillside narrative while maintaining the resilience that smallholder landscapes demand by implementing a blended strategy that combines trials, farmer education, and diversification.

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