Gil Barden Dies Unexpectedly at Age 64

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Rhode Island grower and friend Gil Barden died as the result of a terrible accident on May 25, 2023. Gil was working on cutting down a tree when a wayward limb fell onto him on a windy day resulting in his untimely death. It came as a gut punch to me when I found out what happened. I learned later one of Gil's skills was using the milled wood he harvested from his land for building lumber. Read Gil's obituary in the Providence Journal here. (https://www.providencejournal.com/obituaries/ppvp0497663)

Although I have known Gil and Sandra (Sandie) for many years, I got to know them better while traveling to New Zealand with the International Fruit Tree Association in 2018. We met up first in Atlanta, after leg one of four legs of flights to our destination in Hawkes Bay, NZ. Then in Houston after leg two where we had dinner and beers together. After getting off a very long flight from Houston to Auckland, we got off the plane together craving coffee and what did we see first right outside the arrival gate? A Dunkin Donuts! We said no way! and were informed of a local coffee truck outside the terminal where we truly enjoyed a good cup of Joe! I will never forget it!

I have to say Gil was a challenging guy, but a real good study, and worked tremendously hard with Sandie at Barden Family Orchard in N. Scituate, RI. They were both regulars (and hosts) at our cooperative MA/RI fruit twilight meetings, and had more recently often ventured north to our MA-only twilight meetings. I always appreciated seeing them there. The past couple years, Heather Faubert and I (with Heather's prompting) have nominated Gil and Sandie Barden for American Fruit Grower 'Apple Grower of the Year.' In the sidebar, read what I wrote in my nomination.

Our thoughts are with Sandie and the Barden family as they enter a challenging period at Barden Family Orchard sans Gil. I hope they feel free to reach out for help as necessary.

Sandra and Gil Barden enjoying a good cup of Joe at Auckland, NZ airport, February 25, 2018.

SIDEBAR – Jon Clements nominates Gil and Sandra Barden for American Fruit Grower of the Year

Gil Barden exemplifies the smaller family orchard while maintaining a very high level of orchard management expertise. Gil and his wife Sandie -- they should be nominated as apple growers of the year -- operate a farm stand, go to farmers markets, and of course do pick-your-own, a New England fall tradition. Among orchards in Rhode Island, Gil has been a real study and reaches out for information across state lines and is the most proficient grower of hi-density apples in Rhode Island, including Honeycrisp. Gil and Sandie are

extremely hard workers, every time I visit them -- which is not too often, because they are out of state for me, but several times -- I am astonished by what they are up to, particularly during the growing, harvesting, and marketing seasons. I remember they attended the IFTA New Zealand tour recently, and it was a pleasure being with them there. Gil is somewhat shy, Sandie far less so -- she will let you know what she thinks for sure! (But in a rather nice way.) Barden's have hosted several Rhode Island-Massachusetts fruit growers meeting sponsored by Extension, and are supporters of Extension. Gil's Uncle John was an Extension Professor at Virginia Tech specializing in orchard research and teaching. I have no reservations nominating Gil (and Sandie!), they would make an excellent story, and are as worthy of apple grower(s) of the year as any I have seen, particularly if it is time to highlight some of the smaller -- yet essential for our quality of life and agricultural economy here in New England -- orchards.

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