



fruit trees & orchards



what are they?

'Top fruit' can include apples, pears, plums, cherries, quinces, medlars, chequerberries, mulberries and figs. They've all been grown by humans for thousands of years, have played an important part in the monastic tradition, and were very fashionable in Victorian times. Until a few decades ago, the UK grew nearly all its own fruit – almost everyone with a garden had fruit trees. That's not the case now, and many skills have been lost, such as knowing when the fruit is ripe and ready to pick, or knowing that some fruit needs to be stored before ripening (pears, for example, are often picked under-ripe, and stored until ripe). Interest is beginning to grow again though, as people are becoming more concerned about food and nutrition.

Apples are the most popular top fruit in the UK; there are about 6000 varieties world-wide, and 2000 in this country. The vast majority of trees produce just a few varieties though. Many of the traditional garden and orchard varieties produce fruit that is high in taste and nutrition, but that doesn't meet the top 10 criteria demanded by supermarkets – i.e. uniformity of shape, shininess, transports well, thick skin that doesn't bruise etc. (flavour is no. 6, and nutrition isn't in the top 10).



2000 apple varieties have been grown in UK: some eaten in August, others in March; some for cooking, others for cider; some grow well in the west, others in the north. A good place to see & taste this wide variety is at apple days.



Chip budding is a good type of graft to use to propagate most types of fruit trees.

what are the benefits?

Flavour & nutrition: fruit picked for supermarkets is often picked under-ripe and put into cold storage for long periods – often several months. On your own trees, fruit can be allowed to grow to ripeness, and the flavour and nutritional value will be improved.

Diversity: we don't have to stick to the narrow range of supermarket fruits – we can plant some of the rarer varieties that now only exist in one or two collections.

Wildlife: supermarket fruit is usually grown on dwarf trees, in monoculture plantations that are sprayed with chemicals. Home-grown fruit will more often be organic, on standard (i.e. large) trees, and be part of a diverse landscape that is more beneficial to wildlife.

Easy: fruit trees are perennials, don't need composting (perennials look after their own soil fertility), and just need to be left to get on with producing free fruit every year.

Other yields: fruit trees also provide prunings for pea-sticks or kindling, firewood, waste fruit to feed to animals, leaves for compost and blossom for bees.

Health: fruit is good for us, and if you grow your own, you're more likely to eat more of it – and children too if they're involved in picking. Just being outdoors to pick, climb and prune is healthy too.

Beauty: fruit trees will add to the beauty of any garden.



what can I do?

Old trees: often neglected, so they don't produce so much or such good quality fruit. The main thing to consider is pruning – the cutting back of twigs and branches to remove dead, damaged or diseased wood, and to keep the tree open, allowing in light and air that promotes the growth of fruit. Don't remove more than 1/3 of twiggy growth in any one year, and prune at the right time of year. Apples and pears: Jan-Feb; stone fruits: May-Aug (otherwise wounds created in winter can let in potentially fatal diseases; not a problem for apples and pears though). Obviously you can't prune if you don't have old trees; but sometimes, neighbours will allow you to prune their neglected trees in exchange for some of the fruit it produces. You can have a go at pruning old trees on a course.

New trees: first choose your tree(s); get them from a reputable nursery not the local garden centre – i.e. a nursery that produces the trees themselves by grafting. Choose varieties that will do well in your part of the country (a good nursery can give you loads of advice on this too). Most fruit trees will need a pollination partner (or 2), so make sure you get trees that are known to pollinate each other (or are self-fertile if you only have room for one).

Rootstocks & grafting: each fruit variety is available on a number of different rootstocks, that will dictate the size of the tree. Make sure you get the one that fits your space. Note that the smaller rootstocks will produce trees that



Pear trees will give you beautiful blossom as well as delicious fruit.

need more care and attention (staking, feeding, etc.) and that can't cope well with competition; larger rootstocks are not so fussy. But small ones start to give fruit when younger than large ones.

A fruit will not grow true from seed. Human children are often nothing like their parents, and a fruit tree grown from seed might not have the characteristics you want. If you plant 10,000 apple pips, you may only get one good variety (lots of fruit, tasty, not disease-prone). So, since Roman times, people have been taking grafts from trees of known good origin, and grafting them onto rootstock. Now, every Cox's orange pippin is descended from one original tree. Rootstocks have been developed that control the size of the tree; e.g. a Bramley apple on an M27 rootstock will grow to a maximum of 2m, whereas on a rootstock M25 it will grow to 10m. You can get rootstocks and grafts from good tree nurseries. You can also learn to graft yourself. Usually nurseries do it for you, and provide you with a small tree, or if you know what graft and rootstock, or what kind of tree you want to end up with, they can graft to order. Unusual varieties can be obtained from the national collection at Brogdale, and they can also graft to order. We know of one specialist nursery – Cool Temperate Nursery in Nottinghamshire – who supply apple trees grown on their own roots, rather than grafted. Research indicates that these trees are better able to cope with poor soils and droughts, and that their fruit has better flavour and nutrition, and keeps better.

See our further info section for step-by-step and month-by-month guides to growing tree fruit.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/fruit-trees for more info, links, products, courses & books, inc:
- O & M Martin, *Fruit Trees for Every Garden*
- Sue Clifford & Angela King, *Community Orchard Handbook*
- Ben Pike, *the Fruit Tree Handbook*
- brogdale.org/index.php – nat. fruit collection
- fastllp.com – advice for commercial fruit growers
- bit.ly/3h56itL – community orchard listing

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