

Wholesome HERITAGE

Older heritage varieties of apple are among the very tastiest. **Penny Bunting** tours the apple collection at Chatsworth and picks a few favourites to try at home

Apples are one of the UK's favourite fruits, sitting at the top of the five-a-day list for many. But did you know that you could eat a different variety of British apple every day for a couple of years – and you still wouldn't have tasted them all? Wander along the fruit aisle of any supermarket, though, and you'll be lucky to spot more than five different types of apple. Granny Smiths, Braeburns and Gala are easy to come by, but if you tried asking for a traditional apple – 'Ashmead's Kernel' or 'Egremont Russet', for example – you would likely be met with blank stares.

It is estimated that around 70 per cent of our supermarket apples are imported, sometimes from as far afield as South Africa or New Zealand. One reason for this is that us Brits are just not producing as many apples as we used to. About two-thirds of our orchards have disappeared since 1950. This is bad news for the nation's food security – and it has an impact on wildlife, too.

Orchards are vital habitats that support a wide variety of wildlife. Great spotted woodpeckers, fieldfares, dormice and pipistrelle bats are often found in traditional orchards, and bumblebees and butterflies are attracted to the blossoms.

But biodiversity isn't just about the birds and the bees – the trees themselves also need protecting. As newer species become more popular as a result of their improved disease resistance and the promise of bumper fruit production some of our older varieties are in danger of disappearing. This would be a real shame, especially as some British apples have been around for hundreds of years.

Apples at Chatsworth

The good news is that in recent years there has been a huge surge in interest in growing traditional apple varieties. One



Crunch time: Heritage apples have a fantastic flavour!

place that is taking positive steps towards protecting our apple tree heritage is Chatsworth, in Derbyshire's Peak District.

One of the most famous stately homes in England, Chatsworth is home to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and has been passed down through 16 generations of the Cavendish family. The house is believed to have been the inspiration for Pemberley, in Jane Austen's much-loved book *Pride and Prejudice*. It is thought that the author stayed in nearby Bakewell when she wrote the novel, which was first published 200 years ago in 1813. Chatsworth has also featured in several films.

The kitchen gardens at Chatsworth cover some three acres of the estate and

provide all the fruit, vegetables and cut flowers for the Cavendish family, with excess produce sold at the award-winning Chatsworth Farm Shop, a couple of miles away at the village of Pilsley.

Gardener Glenn Facer, who has worked at Chatsworth for 23 years and manages the fruit gardens, has become something of a heritage apple expert. He is responsible for more than 100 fruit trees planted in various locations throughout the gardens, as well as raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, currants and grapes.

Taste of Derbyshire

The main orchard, sheltered from the harsh Derbyshire winter winds by tall,



Far right: A 'Beeley Pippin' gears up to full blossom.

Right: The local 'Beeley Pippin' apple

Below: The orchard at Chatsworth contains many heritage varieties

KEEPERS NURSERY



Above: Glenn Facer has become something of a heritage apple expert

Below: New heritage apple trees are being propagated by grafting

immaculately clipped hedges, was planted during the 1980s and contains more than 20 trees. It is here that many of the estate's heritage apple trees can be found. Derbyshire varieties feature strongly: 'Lamb's Seedling', 'Beeley Pippin' and 'Newton Wonder' are three such varieties that are thriving.

The original 'Newton Wonder' was discovered around 1870 by William Taylor as a seedling growing in the thatch of the Hardinge Arms pub, King's Newton, Derbyshire. Taylor grafted the seedling and grew it on in the pub's garden, where it survived until 1940. A large cooking apple, which keeps well until Easter, the 'Newton Wonder' was traditionally used at Christmas in stuffing for turkeys and mincemeat.

The 'Beeley Pippin' tree, with its spreading, blossom-laden branches, takes pride of place in the centre of Chatsworth's orchard. 'Beeley Pippin's have been grown locally since 1880, when the apple was first produced in the nearby village of Beeley, part of the Chatsworth estate, by Reverend C Sculthorpe. One of the earliest orchard



trees to come into flower, it produces an apple with pink-flushed skin and a rich, aromatic flavour.

Non-Derbyshire varieties in the orchard include 'Lord Derby' – a green cooking apple dating from 1875 that's actually from Cheshire – 'Blenheim Orange' and, of course, 'Duke of Devonshire'.

Full of flavour

Asked to choose his favourite apple from this impressive selection, Glenn understandably hesitates. "The 'Ashmead's Kernel' is a nice tree," he says. "It dates from 1720, so is one of England's oldest varieties. But for flavour I love 'Worcester Pearmain', which tastes just like strawberries."

A more modern variety, 'Katy', is another favourite of Glenn's. "It did really well last year, as did the 'Lord Derby'. Because of the dismal weather through spring and summer, we got very little fruit from most of the trees. But 'Katy' coped very well and gave us loads of apples."

Glenn admits that some of the heritage varieties aren't without their problems. "The 'Cox's Orange Pippin's and 'Laxton's Superb' tend to get a bit of canker," he admits. "But you can't beat the older varieties for taste – they all have their own distinctive flavours."

As well as the orchard there are fruit trees dotted throughout the kitchen garden. Apples and pears, grown as espaliers, offer protection to vegetables in the brick-built raised beds. In the centre of each large bed there is a 'Bramley' cooking apple tree. The vegetables are grown in rows radiating out from the tree, producing an eye-catching, edible display.

Diligent grafters

New apple trees are created for the estate by grafting. This is a practice that the gardening team has recently tried, with great success. There are rows of baby apple trees, grafted onto MM106 or M26 rootstocks, growing in the kitchen garden – including several 'Beeley Pippin's. "So many of England's old apple varieties have already been lost," explains Glenn, "so this sort of propagation is really important to keep the existing varieties going."

Glenn loves the creativity that comes with working in a beautifully designed kitchen garden like Chatsworth. "It's wonderful to watch the garden develop year after year, and to see how it changes through each season," he says.

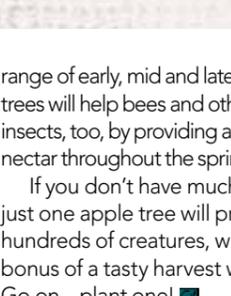
Glenn's passion for apples trees extends to his home life, too. He has more than 40 varieties growing in containers in his garden. "I have built up quite a collection. I've grown them all in containers in case we move house one day – I'd hate to leave them behind!"

Apple Day

The astonishing diversity of British apple varieties is recognised every autumn during Apple Day. This annual celebration on 21 October was first launched by Common Ground (www.commonground.org.uk) in 1990. With hundreds of events held throughout the UK in market places, National Trust properties and community orchards, Apple Day raises awareness of the importance of orchards, celebrates local food and brings communities together to enjoy apple-related activities.

According to the Wildlife Trusts, planting an orchard is one of the best ways to boost biodiversity on your plot. (A traditional orchard is classified as having more than five trees spaced less than 20m (67ft) apart.) Planting a

HERITAGE APPLE TREES TO TRY



1. 'Ashmead's Kernel': An often lumpy and misshapen apple, but keeps well and has a remarkable, distinctive flavour that some say tastes of pear drops. **Pollination group:** C. **Harvest:** mid-October.

2. 'Beauty of Bath': An early cropping variety, dating from Victorian times, which is best eaten straight from the tree. **Pollination group:** A. **Harvest:** early August.

3. 'Egremont Russet': This variety is more than a hundred years old. It has rough, russet skin and a sweet nutty flavour. **Pollination group:** A. **Harvest:** late September.

4. 'Pitmaston Pineapple': Originating in the West Midlands in the late 1700s, this small, yellow apple tastes unmistakably of pineapples. **Pollination group:** C. **Harvest:** mid-October.

5. 'Cox's Orange Pippin': Possibly England's most famous apple, dating from the 19th century. Best suited to southern England as it won't thrive in colder regions. **Pollination group:** B. **Harvest:** October.

6. 'Blenheim Orange': Dating from 1740, a dual-purpose apple with an orange and red-streaked skin and a nutty flavour. **Pollination group:** BT. **Harvest:** early October.

7. 'Newton Wonder': A large green and red cooker that crops heavily and stores well. **Pollination group:** D. **Harvest:** mid-October.

8. 'Ribston Pippin': Originated in North Yorkshire around 1700. This is one of England's oldest apple varieties. Has a pear-like flavour. **Pollination group:** AT. **Harvest:** late September.

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range of early, mid and late-flowering apple trees will help bees and other pollinating insects, too, by providing an ongoing source of nectar throughout the spring months.

If you don't have much space, planting just one apple tree will provide homes for hundreds of creatures, with the added bonus of a tasty harvest within a few years. Go on – plant one! 🍏

WHERE TO BUY

- **Ashridge Nurseries:** 01963 359444, www.ashridgetrees.co.uk
- **Deacon's Nursery:** 01983 840750, www.deaconsnurseryfruits.co.uk
- **Keepers Nursery:** 01622 726465, www.keepers-nursery.co.uk
- **Pomona Fruits:** 0845 6760607, www.pomonafruits.co.uk
- **Thornhayes Nursery:** 01884 266746, www.thornhayes-nursery.co.uk



Orchards are good news for wildlife