



# fruit trees



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

## what are they?

In the UK, 'top fruit' includes apples, pears, plums, cherries, quinces, medlars, chequerberries (google 'em), mulberries and figs (sometimes). They have all been grown in the UK for hundreds 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 almost 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 when to pick them, 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 begin to be 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 grow just a few varieties though. Many of the traditional garden and orchard varieties produce fruit that is high in taste and nutrition, but doesn't meet the top 10 criteria demanded by supermarkets – i.e. uniformity of shape, shininess, transport well, thick skin that doesn't bruise etc. (flavour is no. 6, and nutrition isn't in the top 10).

## 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 much higher.

**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 – 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:** are often neglected, and they don't produce so much or such good quality fruit. The main thing to consider for old trees is pruning - which can be complex, but here are the main things to remember:



*2000 apple varieties have been grown in UK; a good place to see & taste this wide variety is at apple day events (see resources).*



Pruning is 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. You shouldn't remove more than 1/3 of twiggy growth in any one year. Remember to prune at the right time of year. Apples and pears: Jan and Feb; stone fruits: mid-May to the end of 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 agree for you to prune their neglected trees in exchange for some of the fruit it produces. You can learn to prune old trees on a LILI 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 and anything on this factsheet, too). Most 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).

**root stock & grafting:** each fruit variety is available on a no. of different rootstocks, that will dictate the size of the tree. Make sure you get the one that fits your space. The smaller rootstocks will produce trees that need more care and attention (staking, feeding etc.) and can't cope well with competition; larger rootstocks are not so fussy. But small ones fruit earlier in their life.

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 nurseries (see resources). You can also learn to graft yourself, with LILI. 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. One specialist nursery, Cool Temperate Nursery in Notts 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.

## resources

- LILI have a range of useful books, including:
- *Pruning & Training*, the Royal Horticultural Society
- *The Backyard Orchardist*, Stella Otto
- LILI and Brighton Permaculture Trust run pruning and grafting courses – [brightonpermaculture.co.uk](http://brightonpermaculture.co.uk), 07746 185927
- Brogdale National Fruit Collection, Kent – [brogdale.org.uk](http://brogdale.org.uk), 01795 535286
- Cool Temperate Nursery – [cooltemperate.co.uk](http://cooltemperate.co.uk), 0115 916 2673
- there is a list of other nurseries on LILI's links page – [lowimpact.org/linksorchards.htm](http://lowimpact.org/linksorchards.htm)
- apple day, Oct 21 – celebrate all things appley, [commonground.org/appleday](http://commonground.org/appleday), 01747 850820



**correct pruning** increases the health of fruit trees & improves the quality of fruit.

Contact us or visit our website to find out more about our message, networks, factsheets, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, forum, events and volunteering on organic farms. You can also become a Friend of LILI, receive our e-newsletter, and help us change the world.

Low-impact Living Initiative (LILI), Redfield Community, Winslow, Bucks, MK18 3LZ  
 tel: +44 (0)1296 714184 email: [lili@lowimpact.org](mailto:lili@lowimpact.org) web: [lowimpact.org](http://lowimpact.org)  
 Registered in England. Company Ltd. by Guarantee no: 420502