

# An excellent year for

# nuts

Easy to grow and delicious to eat, **Tom Petherick** makes a cracking case for planting nut trees

This is proving to be a bumper year for nuts. It all began in the spring when news broke of the hazelnut crop failure in Turkey due to bad frost. From that moment on, it seemed that every hazel tree in every hedge in England was laden with blossom and then fruit. By the time I saw a fan-trained almond groaning with furry-shelled promise on a wall in a garden in Yorkshire in August, I was convinced that this was the year of the nut.

And so it has proved to be. While some of our favourite fruits have had an indifferent year – apples in particular have been variable depending on location – nuts have come to the fore. Hazels, walnuts and chestnuts are showing record yields. Indeed, standing anywhere near a conker tree in late September without a hard hat on was a health hazard.

While not wishing to do down the fruit trees that are often our first choice to plant, it is becoming easier to make a case instead for nuts. Plums, after all, can be fussy – years can go by without fruit. Equally, early-blossoming pear crops are often devastated by frost, and cherries will fall victim to ravenous birds unless covered.

The growing wisdom is that nuts have more of a role to play. Many types cover the trinity of garden essentials: ornamental, edible and easy to grow. We can also add a fourth: most are extremely healthy.

Choices are myriad; it depends largely on what space is available.



**Bumper crop: sweet chestnut (top) and seeds of the monkey puzzle**

According to Alexander Hunt of Potash Farm ([kentishcobnuts.com](http://kentishcobnuts.com)), the Kentish cobnut, a named variety of the common hazel (*Corylus avellana*), will crop well as a multi-stemmed shrub if pruned out to 6ft 6in (2m) every year. This is undoubtedly the best choice for a nuttery or nut walk. If, however, you are looking to create a wild hedge, then the common hazel remains your best bet. It grows as a multi-stem like the named varieties, produces nuts, and

resents being pruned. After it is strongly established it may be coppiced to produce beanpoles and pea sticks for the garden every five to seven years.

For those with plenty of room there are few more beautiful nut trees than the black walnut. *Juglans nigra* can reach an immense size, close to 98ft (30m), given good soil and a sunny site. Both this and the common walnut, *J. regia*, are fine big trees that take their space properly with a handsome spreading habit. They are excellent for climbing and both produce delicious nuts inside their green

outer shells. They need to be spaced at least 22ft (7m) apart. Be sure you choose your site correctly first time because these trees dislike being moved.

The Japanese walnut (*Juglans cordiformis* var. *ailanthifolia*), also known as the heartnut, is gaining popularity on account of its hardness and the fact that it ripens slightly earlier than the other walnuts. It has an excellent creamy flavour and a pretty heart-shaped nut. It is definitely one to look out for and, at half the size of the bigger walnuts, is more suitable for the garden.

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The nut tree that is finding more friends recently is the almond. Its close relations, the peach and nectarine, were traditionally grown in cold glasshouses because of problems with peach leaf curl. However, recently introduced peach varieties from the United States are proving resistant and this is also true of the almond. This is excellent news; of all the nuts the almond is probably the most versatile.

It can grow as a free-standing tree and, like the peach, is an excellent subject for fan-training on a wall. It must be fan-trained, not espaliered, as it fruits on wood in its second year of growth, which is found farther along the branch each year.

Almonds also have pretty blossom, depending on variety, and a not-unattractive growth habit – tall with arching branches and delicate, pointed leaves. It is a perfect specimen for a small garden. By its nature, and in its fineness, it does not appear to take up too much room.

Other less well-known candidates for our gardens are hickories and pecans, both of them North American natives. They have excellent-flavoured nuts from big trees that are fully hardy.

Now to the conifers. Martin Crawford of the Agroforestry Research Trust ([agroforestry.co.uk](http://agroforestry.co.uk)) is a solid fan of the nut from the monkey puzzle (*Araucaria araucana*), but he warns that there is a 30-year wait for fruit.

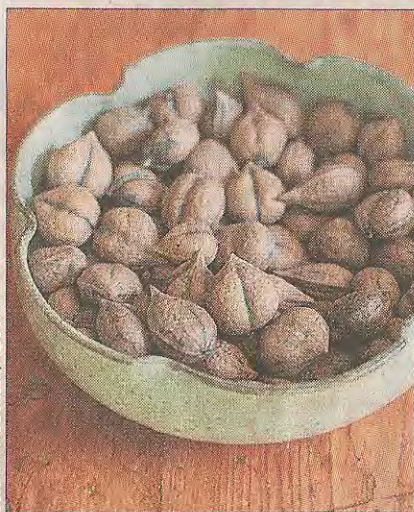
It is another fairly agonising 10 years for anything with which to make pesto from the pine nut tree, *Pinus pinca*. The umbrella pine from the Mediterranean grows well in our climate and will produce up to 10kg of nuts per tree. It is not the most prepossessing of trees for the garden, but can be hidden in a hedge and will make enough of a tree that way to produce satisfactory fruit.

## Nut knowledge

Most nuts are easy to manage, require little if any pruning and are regular croppers. The past two years have been excellent for them. That said, the continuous wet weather in 2012 did prove a problem, especially early on in spring when pollination was hampered. They like the sunshine and present few problems for gardeners.

Beware the black walnut, however, which was found by Pliny to give off a toxin that killed certain plants in its root zone. This is not a myth, as this natural toxin, juglone, affects some plants, especially apples.

Perhaps the final word should go to the oak, the most famous nut tree anywhere in the world. California is home to some of the best of this great genus where the native people have eaten acorns since the dawn of time. There are more than 50 species of oaks in the United States and all of them have edible acorns. Our own *Quercus robur* is no less edible, once the high level of tannin in the acorn is reduced. All this takes is several days in running water and then a swift roast and grind. The result is a palatable powder, rich in vegetable protein and gluten-free.



**Nut walk: from above, clockwise, coppiced hazel trees make an atmospheric spring garden at Sissinghurst; Kentish cobnuts; almonds; Japanese walnuts (heartnuts)**



## Hail the sweet chestnut

The sweet chestnut, *Castanea sativa*, is proving to be the nut with the brightest future in the UK, largely thanks to Martin Crawford who grows and sells 16 varieties from his Agroforestry Research Trust nursery in Devon. Where once we thought

of the sweet chestnut as producing fencing materials in Sussex, a winter dish of roast chestnuts in a market square or an old-fashioned sickly sweet marron glacé at Christmas, they now have a different profile

altogether. Crawford traces their evolution:

● Chestnuts had been written off in the UK because the wild trees were found to produce little fruit of any worth.

● This was due to unsuitable varieties being brought in by the Romans.

● The French have been hybridising two species of sweet chestnut, *Castanea sativa* and the Japanese *Castanea crenata*, for more than 40 years and now produce the best varieties. For example 'Bournette' is a wonderful variety. At 39ft (12m)

width and 26-32ft (8-10m) high after 20 years, it is a big tree.

● The new French varieties are much bigger and have a finer flavour than the wild chestnut.

● The nuts are much easier to peel, both raw and cooked.

● The trees are heavy bearers and quickly into production.

● They are resistant to the chestnut weevil and to chestnut blight.

● The nuts make excellent meal and flour, both of which are gluten-free.