

ALL THEY'RE CRACKED UP TO BE

Nut trees are a productive bunch. Most provide a rich source of protein, fibre and minerals; some, such as the almond, produce fragrant blossom and cosmetic oils; others, such as the walnut, give us handsome timber and sweet and savoury treats; hazel gives us kindling and praline; and the majestic chestnut, with its cross-hatched bark, produces flour and marrons glacés. All offer shelter and food to wildlife, look stunning in our parks and gardens and are ready to harvest now.

My grandmother had a large almond tree by her front door and I vividly remember the blossom, if not the nuts. Mark Diacono at Otter Farm tells me the late spring put paid to nuts this year, but with the right variety (he recommends 'Robijn' – a self-fertile peach/almond cross from Holland that produces fine-flavoured nuts with good

those with a sheltered spot will get nuts. Encourage bumblebees into your garden; with their warm, furry coats they'll forage early and pollinate the blossom.

Twigs should be saved for kindling, or buy sweet-smelling almond firewood from druidwood.co.uk. Commercially, almonds are harvested onto tarpaulins spread on the ground, by banging the boughs with a wooden pole (wearing protective headgear), once most of the hulls have split. After removing the hulls, place to dry on a rack in a cool, dry spot.

Walnuts are splendid trees, a focal point in any garden. Harvest walnuts once the membrane between the two halves has gone brown and the hulls are loosening.

The Walnut Wizard is a useful push-along contraption that picks up nuts from the ground (available from homeandgardengifts.co.uk).

FRANCINE RAYMOND

Home-grown style

As well as yielding tasty treats, nut trees provide sweet-smelling wood and make a fine focal point in any garden



Top nuts: clockwise from top left, Kentish cobnuts; sweet chestnuts; almonds; roasting chestnuts; walnut

rubber gloves. Freeze to cook with squash, fungi or the blessed Brussels sprout.

Hazels are the most rewarding of garden nuts. The trees grow quickly enough to be coppiced every six years in winter for kindling, beanpoles and pea sticks, and the nuts are delicious, if you can get to them green before the squirrels and mice do. Once dried and brown they are tasty roasted at 140C/275F for 20 minutes, and mixed with chocolate in a paste for gianduja spread or to make praline or brittle. Carefully melt 125g caster sugar in a pan until golden, add 50g toasted nuts and a squeeze of lemon juice, mix, then spoon onto greaseproof paper to cool. Break into pieces or blitz into a powder.

My friend Katy Cox from the Mighty Fine Foods company makes cardamom and vanilla almond brittle and chocolate-coated walnut and chilli brittle, and one of her biggest sellers is chocolate and hazelnut vodka: combine 250g hazelnut and chocolate paste or Nutella with 700ml vodka in a litre Kilner jar, shake regularly and stir occasionally until dissolved. Strain and bottle. Refrigerate, and drink within a month.

Katy will be selling her goodies at the beginning of December at my Christmas Pop-up shop (see kitchen-garden-hens.co.uk).

Take off the hulls, wearing gloves, and leave the nuts to

Alexander Hunt, who owns the Walnut Tree Company (walnuttrees.co.uk) is an expert on nuts, and gives specialist advice on orchard and forest trees. He supplies and recommends growing black walnut and 'Lozeronne' for their wood, with hybrids NG23 and MJ209. If you have walnut timber for sale, he suggests contacting titchmarsh-goodwin.co.uk.

Gather chestnuts daily as they drop, wearing thick leather gloves, and remove their prickly overcoats. Slit their shells and roast them on a tray in the oven, or boil in batches, removing two or three at a time with a slotted spoon, then peel wearing

THIS WEEK I HAVE BEEN...

Asking advice from a neighbour who grows enviable agapanthus. He doesn't remove seed heads, but moves his pots to a sheltered part of the garden.

WHERE TO GROW NUT TREES

Almonds (*Prunus dulcis*) need good, light soil in full sun with a frost-free position. Keep away from cross-pollination with peaches or your nuts will be bitter.

Varieties: 'Robijn' (otterfarm.co.uk); 'Ingrid' – self-fertile reliable cropper from keepers-nursery.co.uk; and 'Princess' – a patio variety that needs hand pollination, from thompson-morgan.com.

Hazel, filberts and cobnuts (*Corylus avellana* and *maxima*) are hardy and grow well in a well-drained loamy soil under the high canopy of other trees, in groups or copses for pollination. Prune in midwinter.

Varieties: 'Redzellernut' – from readsnursery.co.uk; 'Cosford Cob' and 'Butler' from chrisbowers.co.uk.

Walnuts (*Juglans regia*, above, like a warm site in heavy fertile loam. They resent being moved, so choose a spot with care. Best for lawns, as decaying leaves prevent other plants growing underneath. Mulch in spring. Varieties: 'Juglans 'Purpurea', the purple-leaved walnut from Reads.



Sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) favours a well-drained acid to neutral soil. A 10-year-old grafted tree will produce 10kg nuts, but will grow to 30 metres with a spread of 15 metres. You'll need a pollinator. Varieties: 'Marigoule', an early-fruiting variety with good crops of large, dark-brown marrons at two to four years, self-fertile from marshalls-seeds.co.uk. 'Maraval' and 'Marron de Lyon' from keepersnursery.co.uk.

For advice on orchard and forest trees, Alexander Hunt (kentishcobnuts.com; 01732 882734 or walnuttrees.co.uk).

ONLINE Easy shrubs for early autumn colour, telegraph.co.uk/gardening

LIFE GARDENING



PEAR AND COBNUT SLICE

Serves: 12 to 15
Preparation time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: 35 to 40 minutes

INGREDIENTS

200g plain flour
 175g caster sugar
 4 medium eggs
 50g melted butter
 15g baking powder
 200ml milk
 1 tsp vanilla extract
 4 large pears
 50g chopped, roasted cobnuts

Method:

- Preheat the oven to 180C/350F/gas 4. Place flour, sugar, eggs, melted butter, baking powder, milk and vanilla into a large bowl and mix well.
- Peel and core the pears and cut into small pieces. Add to the cake mix.
- Grease and line an oblong tin roughly 23cm x 33cm in size. Pour the cake mixture into the tin and sprinkle over the cobnuts.
- Cook in the centre of the oven for 35-40 minutes.
- Allow to cool for 10 minutes and cut into slices, dust with icing sugar.

ALAMY/CLARA MOLDEN



CHOCOLATE, COBNUT AND BERRY SLICE

Makes: 24 squares
Preparation time: 10 minutes, plus overnight chilling

INGREDIENTS:

150g milk chocolate
 50g dark chocolate
 142ml double cream
 50g butter
 50g roasted cobnuts
 75g raisins and dried berries
 3 brioche rolls

Method:

- Put the chocolate, cream and butter into a small pan and heat gently until melted and well blended.
- Roughly chop the cobnuts and place in a bowl with the dried fruit. Whizz the brioche in a processor to form crumbs and add to the bowl.
- Stir in the melted chocolate and mix thoroughly.
- Pour into a 2lb non-stick loaf tin (you could line with cling film if your tin isn't very non-stick) and leave to cool. Then chill in the fridge overnight.
- To serve briefly dip the tin into hot water (not necessary if lined) and tap the tin sharply to release. Cut into small squares or bars, dust with cocoa and serve with coffee. For more recipes visit: kentishcobnuts.com