

Time to shell out?

The English might have hearts of oak, but walnut is where the smart money's heading as **Sue Scott** reports

IF YOU'RE reading this propped up on the sofa bloated from the Christmas excess, odds are there will be a bowl of nuts not far away.

And, because it's THAT time of year, there will inevitably be walnuts among them, most likely over-dry, old and rather bitter from California, China or France – in order of significance – the biggest, most ambitious, and technically advanced producers in the world.

Ten years from now, though, that bowl could be piled high with fresh, sweet-tasting English walnuts as growers crack a domestic market that's ripe for the taking.

Kent, the kernel of UK nut production, has seen some of the newest and most dynamic fruit plantings to have taken place in years, while nationally there has been a flurry of interest in the stately walnut for both fruit and timber production – the latter famously pioneered by Jaguar, which has ploughed money into a National Forest trial of 13,000 trees to replace its top marque Italian and American walnut trim with highly decorative English 'burl'.

"Well over 100h of walnut have been

planted in the last decade or so – that's more than in the previous 10 years without doubt," says Karen Russell, a chartered forester with Lockhart Garratt, who worked on the Jaguar walnut tree project while at East Malling Research and helped found Kent-based The Walnut Tree Company.

A combination of falling top fruit prices, burgeoning consumer demand for healthy nuts and even global warming have conspired to bring English walnut producers out of their shells, and so convinced is Russell of the crop's viability that last month she planted 100 saplings of her own for timber, to go alongside the 15 fruit trees she's already cultivating.

"I think generally the future is bright for walnuts, but at the moment, we are in a chicken and egg situation," says Russell. "I've talked to processors who've said they will take as many English walnuts as



I can bring them.

There's real interest from the market place and if we could source more, the benefits would flow across the nut growing sector, but it needs a kick start."

And it might just have found it. One of only two commercial suppliers of imported trees for fruit and timber in the UK, The Walnut Tree Company was recently acquired by Kentish Cobnuts entrepreneur Alexander Hunt.

Mr Hunt, whose cobnut business has created 10 new jobs in the tiny traditional cobnut growing area of St Mary Platt in Kent, says: "In the last 10 years we seem to have gained the most amazing publicity. Awareness of cobnuts is better than it's ever been."

The little nut – once grown in vast quantities for its fruit, but more

importantly for the chemical it contained that helped set dyes – found its popularity waning with the demise of Britain's textile industry. But added value products, such as this year's award winning Kentish Cobnut Oil from Sevenoaks' Richard Dain, and Mr Hunt's confectionery range, have put cobnuts firmly back on the culinary map.

The opportunity to bring together two businesses that could leverage English nut growers' influence in the market and help displace some of the 11m tonnes of walnuts imported every year was too good to miss, he says.

"In the lead-up to Christmas the supermarkets were flooded with poorer quality nuts from around the globe, but primarily from California, Spain, Italy... and they are not cheap. I think there is an opportunity here for people to properly market English nuts and walnuts have seen the most incredible regeneration. In this area there have been one or two very bold plantings," said Mr Hunt, who intends to begin trials next year on a hedgerow walnut-growing system copied from the French.

While cash-rich estates look to squirrel away vast fortunes in timber trees that will fetch three times the value of English oak in almost half the growing time, commercial fruit farmers are taking a shorter-term view.

Richard Dain of Hurstwood Farm near Sevenoaks, who planted more than 700 trees for nuts six years ago, harvested all four tonnes this October for oil. The decision to press the entire crop from traditional Broadview and dwarf Lara varieties followed the astonishing success of Dain's Kentish Cobnut Oil, which won



Cobnut confectionery sales are helping to revive the market for cobnuts

NUTS AND BOLTS

- Health conscious consumers are growing the market for nuts by 7% year on year.
- If successful in the UK, hedgerow planting of walnuts could increase yields more than three-fold to 7t/h.
- Shelled walnut halves can fetch up to £12/k wholesale.
- Excluding establishment costs, growers stand to pocket up to £4,375/h profit in year 10.
- At three-times the value of oak, walnut is one of the few timber crops that warrants intensive management.
- UK planking grade walnut wood fetches up to £900/m³ and veneer grade up to £2,700/m³.
- Typically, rotation times for UK timber crops are between 35 and 80 years, depending on variety, but in France and Spain hybrids have matured in 25 years.
- Walnut plantations can generate additional revenue from nurse trees. A trial plantation in Flimwell, East Sussex, includes hazel for coppicing, Italian alder and silver birch for firewood, cedar for fencing, and cherry for timber.



“that bowl could be piled high with fresh, sweet tasting English walnuts”

Supreme Champion at this year's Great Taste Awards.

"The flavour as table walnuts is excellent," he says, "but we have our own oil extraction press, which gives us a yield of around half a litre of oil for each kilogramme of kernels." And with oil selling for up to £50/litre, the maths speak for themselves.

Dain, who previously worked closely with Sainsbury and others on developing the market for English cobnuts, shares Hunt and Russell's faith in the crop's money spinning potential, but walnuts are not a quick commercial fix.

Plantations for fruit take between five and six years to reach maturity, while timber growers are lucky to be rewarded in their own lifetime. Nut tonnage in the UK is also modest, when ranked against intensive production methods used elsewhere and the viability of higher yielding systems, such as hedgerow planting, are far from certain in a damp and dreary English climate.

"Yield is terrific, but it's a moot point whether it will work in this country because nobody has done it yet. The French have successfully near Bordeaux – but that's 700 miles further south," says Alan Olley, a retired timber merchant from Flimwell, East Sussex, and founder director of The Walnut Tree Company, who fears blight will be the modern English walnut growers' biggest challenge next to controlling the voracious squirrel.

But Russell remains upbeat. New orchard designs, frost resistant, lateral fruit bearing varieties, and walnut's natural tolerance to drought make it a comparatively easy fruit to grow and well-placed to benefit from drier conditions as climate change turns up the heat on water hungry crops in the South East.

Diminishing supplies of tropical hardwoods and a shortage of homegrown walnut for decorative furniture making, not to mention gunstocks, have meanwhile helped push top grade veneer wood prices to an eye-watering £2,700m³, making it one of the few timber crops worthy of intensive cultivation.

"The South East already offers some of the best growing conditions," says Russell. "And with climate change that's likely to improve. The bigger growers are already getting ahead of the rest."

ON YOUR MARQUES

The Jaguar Walnut Wood trial in the National Forest, has seen 13,000 trees established over the past nine years in the biggest single plantation in the UK. The 27-hectare experimental plot, financed by the car company and created with the help of researchers at East Malling, Kent, could ultimately see rare English walnut 'burl' used in the fascias of the famous marque. But it will take another 50 years before the trees are felled.

The trials have a wider significance, though. "In the past, we have been reliant on hard wood

from tropical sources and in future that's going to dry up," says The Walnut Tree Company's Alan Olley.

Although clearly a long-term investment, the Forestry Commission believes commercial timber plantations are a lost opportunity for landowners in the UK. The distinctive decorative walnut used in Jaguars comes from rare burl, caused by a specific gene in the walnut tree. Because it grows below ground, it can only be harvested once the trees have finished their natural lifespan, after around 50 years.



All photos: Christopher Jeffrey LRPS

