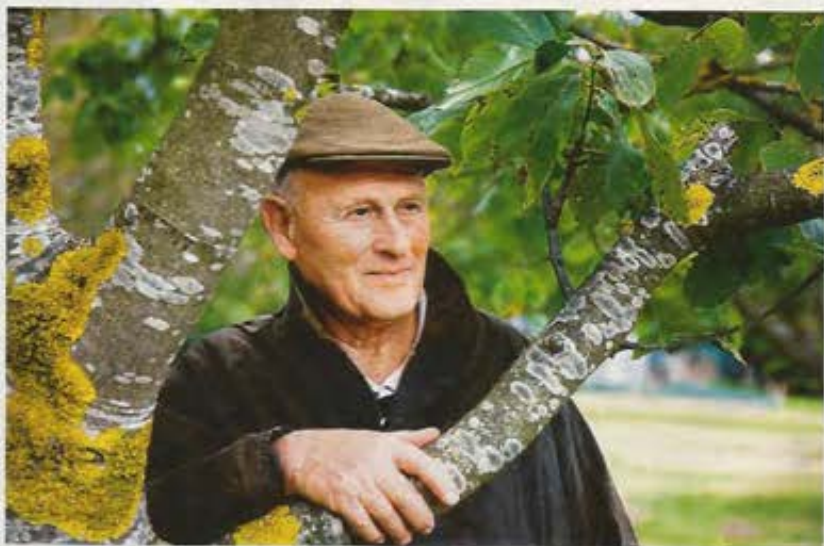




Above rows of walnut trees in Alan Olley's Kentish orchard. Olley (**below**) has been farming walnuts for 14 years.

A hard nut to crack

The British love to bring out the walnuts at Christmas, but they are increasingly imported. Carolyn Hart meets a farmer defying wild weather and scavenging squirrels to reverse the trend. Photographs by Simon Brown



What's the worst thing that can happen to a walnut farmer? A damp spring, followed by a late frost, and torrential downpours thereafter affecting not only your own walnut trees but also all your neighbouring fruit and vegetable farmers. And what's the next worst thing? A massive infestation of grey squirrels desperate for something to eat.

That was 2012 for Alan Olley, a hell of a year for a man in walnut farming. But Olley, who lives on an idyllic homestead in Kent, remains stoical in the face of this natural double whammy. 'It was a mad March,' he says. 'The trees were too advanced for the time of year, and then they were devastated by frost on April 14 – the flowers were destroyed and pollination was almost nil. The squirrels got the rest – they're the other reason why there are very few walnut farmers in the UK.'

Olley, 76, who for 22 years farmed cattle, started farming walnuts in 1998. He had always had an interest in trees, especially walnuts, and with retirement from his timber importing business approaching (a company set up by his father, and which he and his brother took over in 1953), it seemed a logical next step. There are now 132 trees from 15 varieties over two acres. In 2009 he sold his walnut tree company to



Spicy walnut savouries makes 20

These are handy to make the day before you need them. Just slice and bake for nutty nibbles.

- 75g butter, sliced
- 110g plain flour
- 2 tbsp walnuts, finely chopped
- 110g strong cheddar, grated
- 1 tbsp wholegrain mustard
- milk for brushing
- sesame seeds for coating

Pre-heat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. Rub the butter into the flour until it takes on the texture of breadcrumbs. Add the walnuts and cheese. Stir in the mustard and press the dough together. Add a little water if the dough seems too dry. Form into a roll and wrap in clingfilm or foil. This can be stored in the fridge for a day or two and quickly baked when needed, or it can be frozen.

Before baking brush the roll with milk and roll in sesame seeds. Slice into rounds 1cm thick and bake on greased baking sheets for about 20 minutes or until golden.

Pear, orange and walnut preserve

makes about 2kg

- 1.35kg pears, peeled, quartered and sliced
- 2 oranges, finely chopped
- 1.3kg sugar
- 450g raisins
- 175g walnuts, chopped

Gently cook all the ingredients, except the walnuts, in a preserving pan (or saucepan) with 150ml water over a low heat for an hour and a half. Add the walnuts and cook for a further 30 minutes. Cool slightly and pour into clean, warm jars.

'Walnuts are a lovely tree to have in a garden. And the Russian oligarchy love walnut furniture. If one buys it, they all want it'



Alexander Hunt, who owns the nearby Potash Farm, dealing in cobnuts and timber. Hunt, who is big in British nuts – he is chairman of the Kentish Cobnut Association, which has 150 members located between Corbridge and Penzance – took over the business and, with Olley, manages the estate, with some occasional help from Olley's two grandsons.

It is hard, rewarding work and it is plain that Olley loves the trees. But it is also apparent, especially after this year, that a life spent growing walnuts in Britain is a life spent at odds with the weather. That, in a nutshell, is why it is so hard to find an English walnut (at Christmas you're more likely to be eating a Californian, French or Eastern European walnut than a homegrown variety), and why Olley and Hunt's Kentish walnut orchard is such an unusual, welcome sight.

'Growing walnuts is a long-term game,' Hunt



says. 'Fruiting trees won't be productive for at least four or five years. It takes at least 10 years to get your money back.'

There are only about 200 acres in Britain growing walnuts commercially as a result. Historically, there used to be many more of these graceful trees. They were imported initially by the Romans, who grew their walnuts alongside hazelnuts and chestnuts. They made flour from the chestnuts and used walnut shells for fuel, a practice carried on by Olley. There are still pockets of walnut orchards around the country – especially in Oxfordshire where historically, when wheat was in short supply, they would grind up walnuts to make flour for bread.

Olley's two acres of walnut trees rival the arboretum at East Malling, which holds the national collection. Olley's trees include Canadian, Dutch, Bulgarian, French and ancient English, one of

Turkey terrine serves 10

This is a good dish for a large group and easy to slice. Serve it with cranberry relish and chopped spring onions.

- 450g boned belly of pork
- 225g pig's liver
- 450g uncooked turkey, minced
- 225g pancetta or bacon pieces
- 110g walnuts, toasted and chopped
- 110ml dry white wine
- 1 tbsp brandy
- 20 green peppercorns
- 10 juniper berries, crushed
- ½ tsp mixed ground nutmeg and allspice
- ¼ tsp salt

Set the oven to 150C/gas mark 2. Chop the pork and liver in a processor until the meat is slightly coarser in texture than the turkey. In a large bowl, thoroughly mix all the ingredients with your hands. Pack the mixture into a large loaf tin lined with baking parchment and smooth the top.

Place the loaf tin in a roasting tin with sufficient water to come halfway up the side. Bake uncovered for two and a half hours. When it is cooked, the terrine will have produced some fat that will keep the terrine moist and flavoursome as it cools.

When it is completely cold, stand the tin on a plate, cover with a piece of foil and cut a strong piece of card to fit the top of the tin. Weigh this down with something heavy and leave in the fridge for at least 24 hours. To serve, turn out and remove the excess fat with kitchen paper.



'Walnuts help lower cholesterol and keep the brain going. We sell a lot to people with high cholesterol. And the oil is terrific'

which, the North Down Claw Nut, was originally brought to Kent by the Romans. Olley acquired his Claw Nuts from 'an old farmer in his 90s who had been growing walnuts from seed all his life – they produce either great big nuts or little ones.'

Walking with Olley through his orchards is an education in nuts. Walnuts are beautiful trees, today standing in dappled sunlight, surrounded by mown grass. About 20 per cent of his trees are grown for timber, hedged in between nursery trees to force them to grow straight; the rest are grown for fruit. Most of the walnuts are picked in June before the shell forms and sold as green walnuts for pickling. That takes care of the squirrel problem early in the year – but leaves things wide open in the autumn, when the rest of the walnuts are harvested in time for Christmas.

'It's a huge problem,' Olley says. 'If I didn't pick the green walnuts, I'd have no crop at all because

of the squirrels. Squirrels do a lot of damage – they could eat a third of everything I produce. They ravish the walnuts and chew through the spring shoots.'

Controlling squirrels is almost impossible. 'Whippets are good apparently,' he says, 'or I shoot them and find their hands stained by walnut juice...' He is trying out other methods involving plastic tree collars.

It is easy to understand how he might feel slightly under siege from nature. He and his wife, Ann, live on the smallholding in a couple of 17th-century cottages knocked into one. Low-beamed and ingle-nooked it may be, but it is also on the Scotney estate on the Kent-Sussex borders and almost completely surrounded by woodland. As you wander through rows of trees planted against a background of Scotney forest, the weight of nature begins to bear down on you – an unsettling sensation of eyes

peering out of the woodland depths, waiting for a chance to nip in and steal a nut. No wonder Olley feels surrounded by the enemy. 'Deer and badgers, and everything else too,' he adds morosely, as we survey his front lawn, now hopping with happy rabbits in the autumn sunshine.

The collaboration between Hunt and Olley, and the company that has evolved as a result, seems to work well. Together they can supply not only seasonal nuts, but also timber and nursery trees. 'Walnuts are a lovely tree to have in a garden,' Hunt enthuses. 'And the Russian oligarchy love walnut furniture. If one buys it, they all want it.'

And you're not only getting a source of much-coveted wood and a great Christmas nut, but also a very healthy product. 'Walnuts have got all the right vitamins,' Hunt says. 'They help lower cholesterol and keep the brain going. We sell a lot of walnuts to people with high cholesterol. And the oil is terrific.'



Walnut parfait roulade serves 8

This roulade can be made the day before you need it.

for the meringue

- 5 eggs, separated
- a pinch of cream of tartar
- 110g caster sugar
- 20g plain flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 125g walnuts, chopped

for the filling

- 300ml double cream
- 2 egg yolks
- 4 tbsp caster sugar
- 55ml Amaretto or Marsala

for the streusel

- 50g white chocolate, grated
- 50g walnuts, roughly chopped
- a little icing sugar for dusting

Preheat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. Whisk the egg whites with the cream of tartar until the firm peak stage, then add half of the sugar a little at a time to make a meringue mixture. In another bowl, whisk the remaining sugar and egg yolks until thick and pale. Fold in the flour, baking powder, walnuts and a pinch of salt. Gently fold in the meringue mixture a quarter at a time, keeping in as much air as possible, then smooth it into a Swiss roll tin lined with baking parchment. Bake for 35 minutes until it is light brown and springy. Cool for five minutes. Lay a sheet of baking parchment over the roulade and invert



the tin. Carefully peel off the lining paper, leave for 10 minutes and then roll up with clean parchment inside, as you would a Swiss roll. Cover with a damp cloth.

To make the filling, whip the cream until fairly stiff, and chill. In a bowl over hot water beat the egg yolks, sugar and Amaretto until the mixture doubles in volume and the beaters leave a trail when lifted. Cool this mixture by standing the bowl in iced water for five minutes. When completely cold, combine with the beaten cream and whisk until the firm peak stage.

Unroll the roulade, spread with the filling and roll up again. Mix the white chocolate and walnuts together and spread on top of the roulade – you can hold it in place with a smear of the filling. Dust with the icing sugar.



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In a cool, dark place, it'll keep for up to six months.' And you can do a lot with a walnut in a culinary sense, as Ann Olley demonstrates later.

Ann is a fearsomely practical presence in the kitchen. She learnt to cook with her mother, and her years spent living with a nut farmer have rendered her adept at making the most of a walnut. She has even written a book of walnut recipes that she self-published. 'I spent a year collecting walnut recipes,' she says. 'I tried to keep it normal, using the kind of ingredients people already have in their cupboards.'

She has spent the preceding week cooking a feast of walnut-themed dishes, now laid out for the benefit of the photographer. Everything, including the walnut savouries, roulade and terrine, is homemade. In the absence of this year's walnuts, there is a bowl of last year's walnuts on the table. 'I dry them in the sun and they keep for more than a year,' Olley says. 'If there's no sun, I fix up a homemade wind tunnel and dry them in that.'

This year Olley has also been experimenting with almond trees (there is only one other grower of almonds in Britain, in the Midlands) and marron chestnuts, 'but they didn't take', he says. 'Only one survived; there are no others that I know of, except at Houghton Hall [in Norfolk] where there is an avenue of dessert chestnuts.'

walnuttrees.co.uk (01732-882734). The last Christmas order date from Potash Farm is December 21 (kentishcobnuts.com). Ann Olley's recipe book is available from the Potash Farm website and from westcottgawalnuts.co.uk, at £10



Walnut and syrup tart serves 10

for the pastry

- 50g butter at room temperature
- 50g icing sugar
- 1 egg, beaten
- 150g plain flour
- 2 tbsp double cream

for the filling

- 2 eggs
- the rind and juice of a lemon
- 225g golden syrup
- 300ml double cream
- 2 eating apples, peeled and finely chopped
- 2 tbsp marmalade
- 110g breadcrumbs
- 110g walnuts, finely chopped
- a few walnut halves for decoration

Preheat the oven to 190C/gas mark 5. Cream the butter and sugar and add the egg slowly. Gradually incorporate the flour and cream until the pastry comes together. Wrap in clingfilm and chill for an hour.

On a well-floured board roll out the pastry into a circle, and fit into a 22cm loose-bottomed flan tin with extra pastry hanging over the sides. Line with greaseproof paper and baking beans and bake blind for 15 minutes. Remove the paper and beans and return to the oven for five minutes. Reduce the oven to 170C/gas mark 3.

Mix the filling ingredients together. Trim the surplus pastry from the flan and place on a baking tray. Fill the flan and place the walnut halves on top. Bake for 40 minutes until firm. Leave to cool before serving.



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