



## Helen Babbs

Helen writes, gardens and keeps goats on her family smallholding in West Wales. In the best HF tradition, her writing work is done in a converted stable block. Examples of her articles about all aspects of smallholding can be found on her website: [helenbabbs.co.uk](http://helenbabbs.co.uk)



# All about growing WALNUTS

Helen Babbs discovers walnuts – one of the most **reliable nuts** you can **grow easily** at home



Photo © Martin Crawford.

themselves well, and quickly outgrow the need for staking after just a couple of years. Unlike my apple trees they also need no fiddly annual pruning, and crop reliably each year without any problems of biennial bearing. And this isn't just a one-off, either – Alexander Hunt, a long-term walnut grower and chairman of the Kentish Cobnuts Association, describes them as “hardy, very resistant to pests and diseases, and very low maintenance”.

## WHICH WALNUT TO GROW?

According to Alexander, the most important thing is to choose a variety of walnut suited to your location. While you might get lucky with a seedling, the best choice is one of the many named varieties propagated, like fruit trees, by grafting. For gardens in the South, West and Midlands regions, Alexander recommends ‘Broadview’, ‘Buccaneer’ and ‘Lara’, and for the North and Scotland he recommends ‘Fernette’ and ‘Fernor’, both French selections which come into leaf later and avoid late frosts, so do better in colder areas.

While a walnut tree will eventually become a large, spreading tree reaching up to 30m high, they don't reach this size overnight! After twenty years the average walnut tree will be 8–12m high, but will already produce a yield of over 50kg of nuts each year. However, even if you only have a tiny garden there's still a walnut tree variety to suit. “The ‘Rita’ variety has



‘Broadview’ walnuts in their shells (left) and in their green husks (right). Photos © Martin Crawford.



Even a relatively young tree will provide excellent cropping. Photo © Chris Jeffery LRPS.

a restricted growth habit, so is ideal for growing in a pot or a ‘postage stamp’ of a garden,” says Alexander. “The nuts are a little smaller and not of the very finest quality, but it's still a productive tree.”

## WHERE TO BUY

Although many fruit tree nurseries offer a type of walnut tree, to get a wider choice I found it necessary to go to a more specialist nut tree supplier. In the UK, these include:

- Agroforestry Research Trust ([www.agroforestry.co.uk](http://www.agroforestry.co.uk)).
- Orange Pippin Fruit Trees ([www.orangepippintrees.co.uk](http://www.orangepippintrees.co.uk)).
- The Walnut Tree Company ([www.kentishcobnuts.com](http://www.kentishcobnuts.com)).
- The Sustainability Institute Ireland ([www.fruitandnut.ie](http://www.fruitandnut.ie)).

## ONE, TWO... OR MORE?

Walnuts are different to fruit trees in that they have separate female flowers and male catkins on the same tree. While this means they are technically self-fertile, the catkins and flowers don't always appear at exactly the same time. Consequently, pollination and nut yield are better if two different trees pollinate each other. As walnuts are wind-pollinated, Alexander reckons this is not too much of a problem, and says: “If you have another walnut tree as far as a mile away, yours is going to get pollinated.” Planting more than one walnut tree on your own holding, however, will make the process more reliable. Trees of two different varieties are best, so the early catkins of one can pollinate the early flowers on the other – a ‘belt and braces’ job.



Walnut catkins (left) and female flowers (right).

Walnuts can be planted as a group in a ‘plat’ – the nut equivalent of an orchard – but also make attractive garden trees in their own right. There's even a red-leaved variety which produces pinkish-tinted walnuts, and although gardening myths suggest walnuts can have a detrimental effect on other plants, this is not proven, and I certainly haven't found any evidence of it in practice. An ideal spacing is 7–10m between trees, or 4m in the case of dwarf varieties.



A walnut ‘plat’. Photo © Chris Jeffery LRPS.

## GETTING GROWING

As regards planting and day-to-day growing, walnuts are pretty much the same as any other trees. They're generally sold as three-year-old grafted trees, still quite small but well branched. Whether pot-grown or bare-rooted, these should be planted whilst dormant during the winter. Walnuts prefer a rich soil, and a near-neutral pH of between 6 and 7. This means it's best to add plenty of organic matter to the soil while planting, ideally leaf-mould, which

