

EARLY APPLES AND PEARS

Gerry Edwards, Southern Branch.

There is a general perception that English apples are available from around September lasting to Christmas and that pears are available for September, October and possibly November. As a result of this perception imported apples and pears are consumed in great quantity during other times of the year many of which are absolutely tasteless.

It is pleasing to know, therefore, that English apples can be eaten in probably every month of the year, with the exception of June, and English pears can be eaten between July and January. So forget the Antipodean and South African apples and pears and grow your own instead, organically and with greater choice!

On this occasion I am going to tell you about the early season apples and pears and what a selection I am going to give you! You will be surprised at just how many there are!

Without further ado let's have a good look at the early apples. First of all it is important to realise that the short growing season can affect the flavour of early apples. Some of them are very good indeed and some are rather poor; I will do my very best to only recommend the former! Secondly it must be recognised that these early apples will not store at all; indeed they are best eaten directly off the tree. Some of them will last for a couple of days in the fruit bowl but they really do lose their quality as soon as they are picked. Finally although it is often suggested that the best early cooking apples are, in fact, unripe dessert apples I am going to recommend four very good, early *cooking* apples.

Perhaps the earliest dessert apple that is easily grown is Vistabella (often known as Vista Bella). In a good summer this can be ready as early as the first week of July but it is usually best considered to be ready at the end of July/early August. For an early apple it is easy to grow but it does need a relatively warm position to achieve its best flavour. It is a dark red apple that can be scented and has a superb flavour often tasting of raspberries or loganberries. It is surprisingly juicy and sweet and to my mind is an ideal apple to start off the season. Unfortunately it can easily become a biennial bearer and is somewhat prone to canker and so it is best to regularly thin the crops to try and avoid its bienniality and avoid growing it in the wetter parts of the country. Nevertheless it is well worth growing if at all possible.

Beauty of Bath is, perhaps, the best known early apple and it easily justifies its place in my list. It can be ready to eat at the end of July but is usually at its best in the first weeks of August. It is a very colourful apple, being red flushed and striped, and has a sweet taste when it is perfectly ripe although perhaps not as juicy as Vistabella. It has to be perfectly ripe to be at its best - if tasted too early it can be very acidic and if tasted too late it can be very woolly. In years gone by it was grown as a commercial variety but its tendency to sometimes drop before fully ripe led to its downfall.

Irish Peach is a highly favoured apple in some parts of the country. It is ready for eating in early/mid August and at its best it has a wonderful taste which is a perfect balance of acidity and sweetness. It is said to have a perfumed flesh and it can be very juicy. It was a very popular apple in Victorian and Edwardian times and was grown commercially in the nineteenth century. It is an easy apple to grow in the garden and can still be found growing all over the country.

George Cave is another attractive variety with a red flush and carmine stripes. Its flavour is as good as it looks and has a very interesting taste which can be described

as very "moorish"! As with Beauty of Bath, which it follows in season, it used to be a very popular commercial variety and it is now still quite often found in farm shops or "pick your owns". It is ready for eating at around the same time as Irish Peach and if I was asked to choose between the two I would be hard pushed to come down for either. Why not grow both!

Devonshire Quarrenden has been around for a long time - being first recorded in 1676 - but it still has a lot to offer as an early apple. Like Vistabella it can be a biennial but it is an easy apple to grow and is considered very highly by the connoisseurs. It is an attractive apple having a dark crimson flush over most of the fruit but for some reason it appears less attractive to the birds as some other red or similarly coloured varieties. It was much grown in Victorian times and prized for its very distinctive sweet strawberry taste. It is usually ready to eat in mid August but in hot summers I have found it most enjoyable at the end of July. It is not easy to catch it exactly at its prime but if this is achieved you will not stop at one apple!

My next selection is another George - this time George Neal. It is a good garden variety as it is a prolific producer of quality apples that are refreshing to eat and which will cook very well. This apple is often classified as a cooking apple but in my opinion it can be considered as a good dessert apple when it is ripe. It reliably ripens around the second week of August whatever the summer weather and this can be quite a bonus in cooler, wetter summers. It can be found in many gardens around the country where it can often be confused with James Grieve due to its similar appearance.

Although Discovery is considered a late August/early September apple I personally find it to be much earlier than this in the south of England; indeed I reckon to eat my first Discovery during the last few days of July! It is a wonderful early apple, which will keep for a few days when picked, that looks just as good as it tastes and vice versa! Where the sun gets at the fruit it is a bright red apple that positively glows in the sun. When fully ripened on the tree it is crisp and juicy, often has pink stained flesh and can occasionally have a slight hint of strawberry. It is a recent variety having been raised around 1949 and is now the main early commercial variety. It is a prolific fruiter and is ideal for the garden, particularly where there are children!

My final choice of an early dessert apple is Tydeman's Early Worcester which is another fairly modern apple having been raised in 1929. Usually ready to eat around the middle of August it has inherited that wonderful strawberry flavour of Worcester Pearmain although it must be really ripe to be at its very best. Another good looking red apple it is grown in various parts of the world as an early commercial variety as, like Discovery, it will keep for a few days before it loses its quality. It is very easy to grow and complements Discovery very well.

My first choice of early cooking apple is Early Victoria (also known as Emneth Early). This is a very early cooking apple which can be ready as early as mid July in good summers. Even in poorer summers it is ready to use by the beginning of August. It cooks very well and can become very frothy which is absolutely ideal for a summer dessert. In the early part of the twentieth century it was considered a good commercial variety but its tendency towards biennial cropping led to its demise in this area. In the garden it can become a regular cropper if it is well thinned out. Nevertheless, even if it does become a biennial cropper this variety is well worth considering for the garden as it is so easy to grow!

Lord Suffield is a codlin type apple and cooks to a sharp froth. It was a very popular Victorian variety which was grown widely in gardens in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century where it was considered to be a valuable early cooking apple. It is usually ready from the beginning of August and will last for a few weeks if

kept in a good position. It is a useful variety to have in the garden because it does not only produce a reliable crop each year but it also has a wonderful pink blossom in the spring.

Keswick Codlin, is, perhaps, one of the best early cooking apples and possibly one of the best to look at. It will cook to a juicy, cream froth and hardly needs any sugar to sweeten it. It was one of the most popular early cooking apples of the nineteenth century and was grown commercially until the 1930's. It is ripe from the middle of August but many gardeners do not pick it until later because the yellow fruits are very decorative. It is well worth growing in the garden as unlike other early cooking apples it does not tend towards biennial bearing. I cannot recommend this variety highly enough!

Grenadier is my final choice of early cooking apples and it is a very fine apple. It replaced Keswick Codlin as a commercial early apple and is still found commercially today as the earliest cooking apple. It is a very good cooking apple to grow in the garden as it is scab resistant but it can tend towards biennial cropping if it is not thinned well. It can be a large apple and if not over cooked it can be suitable as the first baked apple of the season! In my experience it is reliably ready from the middle of August onwards and will keep in store for a few weeks. It is a fine apple to look at and its flavour is just as good.

Now let us move on to the early pears. Before I start I must give a warning about pears, particularly the early pears. When pears ripen they do so very quickly and within a very short time - sometimes only a matter of a few hours - they go very soft and mushy and become completely inedible. It is essential therefore to catch them just before or as they ripen or you will not be eating them! My preference is to pick them before they ripen and let them ripen under a very careful eye - indeed this, in my opinion, is the only way to enjoy pears. I can hear you asking - how do I know when a pear is ripe? There are two main tests here - first of all there is a very slight change in colour - usually to a yellow colour and secondly the end of the pear by the stalk has a little bit of give. By the time a pear smells ripe it is usually overripe. Don't say that you haven't been warned! But do not be put off growing pears as to my mind there is nothing better than eating a luscious, juicy pear especially when it is grown in your own garden!

I am sorry to say that the selection here is far less than that of the early apples as the majority of pears in this country take a little longer to grow. Nevertheless I am recommending a number of early mouthwatering varieties! Doyenne d'Ete is my first choice here and it is one of the first varieties to ripen in this country which is usually at the end of July in the south and a couple of weeks later in less warm areas. It is of French/Belgian origin and a fairly small pear but it has a surprisingly good flavour for an early pear and it is sweet and very juicy. Its disadvantages is that all the fruits tend to ripen at the same time and so you are going to have to share them around or eat a very large amount at one time! Nevertheless it is an easy variety to grow, it remains a very small tree, it is very good cropping and it is an excellent start to the pear season!

Jargonelle is considered to be one of the oldest pears in cultivation having been first noted in 1629. It is a very hardy pear and has been grown throughout Britain including Scotland. It is a good garden pear being relatively resistant to scab but as it is a partial tip bearer it is best grown as a bush tree. The fruit is of a good size and is very tender and juicy, sweet with a slight musky flavour but can be a little gritty near the core. Although it can be ready as early as the beginning of August in a hot summer it is more often ripe by the middle of August and perhaps a week or two later in the far north.

Clapp's Favourite was raised in the USA but has been grown widely in Britain over the years. In past years it has been grown quite widely in both countries as it will keep for a few weeks in cold storage and this can be emulated at home. It is a very good cropping tree and the fruits need to be thinned well if a good size is to be achieved. It is a good tree for the garden situation as it is a moderate grower and can often be quite resistant to scab. It does not have the best of flavours for an early pear, being a little coarse at times, but it does have the storage potential which is a great advantage. It is ready from the middle of August but can be earlier in warm summers.

Precoce de Trevoux is probably French in origin but it has been grown in much of Europe. It is considered to be one of the finest flavoured and highest quality of the early pears but it flowers early and can be caught by late frosts. To achieve a good crop it needs to be grown in a frost free area and sheltered from strong winds. It is a good tree for the garden as it is a moderate grower, it has good resistance to scab and it comes into bearing at an early age. It has an excellent flavour which can have a little perfume and its texture is wonderfully smooth. It is usually ready around the end of August and it is well worth waiting for!

Beth is a relatively modern variety which was bred in England in 1938. Although it, perhaps, does not have the flavour of some other early pears it is very compact growing, very reliable and heavy cropping all of which make it ideal for growing in gardens. It probably needs a warm summer to develop its best flavour. It is not a particularly large pear - larger than Doyenne d'Ete, however - but it does look very attractive on the tree. It has a juicy, melting flesh that can be fairly sweet with perhaps a slight musky taste. It is ready to eat from around the last week of August.

My final selection is the well known Williams's Bon Chretien.



Although not considered a very early pear - it is usually not ready until the beginning of September - it would be wrong to ignore it as it is a quality pear most suitable for growing in gardens and it can be ready to eat in August in a warm summer. Although it is an English pear by origin it is grown all over the world - probably the most widely grown - most particularly in the USA where it is known as Bartlett. It is a heavy cropping tree which is a fairly moderate grower and it flowers late enough for it to be suitable for colder areas. Unfortunately it can be somewhat susceptible to scab and so it should not be grown in the wetter parts of the country. If well thinned the fruits can be of a good size and one can form a good meal! The texture of this pear is very

smooth, juicy, sweet and can have a strong musky flavour in warmer summers. I think that this is a very good pear to complete my selection!

I hope that I have persuaded you to think about growing some of the early apples and pears rather than going out to buy the limited foreign choice that the supermarket will have!

This is the ninth in a series of articles that Gerry has agreed to write for our magazine on fruit growing, and exhibiting, thank you.

He has written for Garden news, The Garden magazine (RHS monthly publication for members) and Kitchen Garden magazine, amongst others.

Gerry is Chairman of the RHS Fruit Group Committee, a member of the RHS Fruit, Vegetable and Herb Committee, and a member of the RHS Fruit Trials Panel. Gerry has developed a garden design and fruit related business and his website is www.gerryedwardsgardenservices.co.uk , a man of many talents! - ed