



taste these cracking hazelnuts

Kentish cobnuts



Vanessa Berridge investigates why these hardy and delicious cultivated hazelnuts are enjoying a revival

Pictures: Gemma Day

On a September morning, the last traces of early mist drift away, revealing a timeless Kentish scene. Slanting rays catch the white cowl of an oasthouse at the top of the cobnut orchard, and, apart from a radio mast up on Wrotham Down, the view would be unchanged from a century ago, when many of the cobnut trees were planted.

We are at Potash Farm, just outside the hamlet of St Mary's Platt, south-east of Sevenoaks. The name 'platt' derives from the local word for cobnut orchard, and the

area is at the heart of Kentish cobnut-growing country. Cobnuts, a type of hazelnut, have been produced for centuries along the sandstone ridge that stretches from Westerham in the west to Charing and Ashford in the east, thriving in the relatively infertile soil.

Hardy trees

"Cobnuts were originally planted where other crops wouldn't grow," says Alexander Hunt, owner of Potash Farm, and chairman of the Kentish Cobnuts Association. "The

trees like to struggle a bit." This hardiness meant that many fruit farmers would grow the nut on less fertile areas of their land.

Cobnuts were a popular crop throughout the 19th century up until the 1920s, with cobnut platts covering more than 7,000 acres of Kent by the early 1900s. "There was easy access from here to the markets of Covent Garden and Spitalfields in London," explains Alexander.

"The nuts were also used before chemical dyes to set colours in textiles – and, in the 19th century, they were transported by road, rail and canal to the textile mills of Leeds and Manchester. But, during the Second World War, arable crops and wheat were needed to feed the nation, so a lot of cobnut trees were grubbed out." Then, after the war, the cobnut industry was affected by



“The nut trees provide habitat for mice, owls and other wildlife”

came from Goudhurst in about 1840,” says John. “It produces a crop that is both reliable and flavoursome. In fact, it is so successful that it has supplanted most other cobnut varieties in Kent.”

Alexander grew up in St Mary’s Platt and began picking cobnuts as a student to earn extra money. He has been growing cobnuts himself for 25 years, buying the six-acre Potash Farm plantation in 2005. Since then, he has restored the 500 original trees, mostly planted in around 1900, and put in a further 500. A keen ambassador for cobnuts, he sells his produce through farm shops, local events and via his website, and conducts educational tours around his own platt.

Happy nutters

Each tree produces around 6kg (13lb), and nuts are all hand-picked by workers known as ‘nutters’. The picking season begins on St Philibert’s Day, 22 August, and lasts until the end of September. Cobnuts are sold fresh, not dried like many other nuts. At the beginning of the season, the nuts are milky-green, fresh, moist and ideal for salads. By late September, however, they have turned dark brown, dryer and sweeter, and are ideal for desserts. They are put through a de-husking machine and sold in their shells year-round.

A nutter picks away on the early September morning that I visit, dropping the green nuts into a trug made from local willow and hazel, which surround the plantation. The wild hazel hedges act as cobnut pollinators.

In an Area of Outstanding National Beauty, this plantation is not just a pretty face – it also provides a valuable habitat for mice, owls and other wildlife. More power to the nutters.

Find out more
KENTISH COBNUTS ASSOCIATION
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www.kentishcobnutsassociation.org.uk

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1 Cobnuts grow in papery, creamy husks in which they are sold until the end of October 2 Earlier season cobnuts are milky-green, while those picked in October are darker and sweeter 3 Alexander Hunt, one of 150 growers in the Kentish Cobnuts Association 4 Potash Farm, in St Mary’s Platt, was originally planted up c1910 5 The hard part is cracking the nuts without smashing the kernel

competition from nuts that were imported from Commonwealth countries.

So Alexander is on a mission to revive this important local heritage crop, and to promote cobnut production to potential growers as a further source of income.

“Recent years have seen a bit of a revival,” he says. “The association was formed

in 1990 to help to promote our traditional industry.

It now has more than 150 members, from Cornwall to the Borders, including people who have a

few cobnut trees in their gardens, parts of orchards that were planted before their houses were built.”

To encourage the nut and its growers to thrive, the association runs courses on pruning and caring for the trees.

But there are fewer than 70 commercial

growers, mostly around Sevenoaks, between them harvesting some 5,000 acres of cobnut plantation. Tim Chambers has a five and half acre plantation which has always been part of his soft fruit farm. “I divert my workers for a few days at a time to pick nuts,” he explains. “I sell the nuts wholesale through markets in London,

Cardiff and Bradford.”

John Cannon, also a soft fruit producer, has grown cobnuts for 40 years, producing about 80 tons annually on

his 40-acre plantation, which he sells on to Waitrose and Morrisons. He holds the National Collection of about 50 varieties, including Gunslebert, which has a small husk that is easy to remove when ripe, Hall’s Giant, and the traditional Kentish Cob, a long filbert. “The Kentish Cob

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