

The riches of Kent

Renowned throughout the world for its lush green landscape which is filled with orchards and hop gardens, Kent also has an extensive coastline offering a gateway to the Continent and a fascinating history. **Jill Shearer** discovers the treasures that the garden of England has to offer



Cobnuts are traditionally planted among the hops, apples trees, cherries or gooseberries

NUTS ABOUT COBNUTS!

Cobnuts – also known as filberts – the name for the cultivated variety of hazelnut, must be one of our oldest national delicacies. Hazels have been growing wild in Britain's countryside for thousands of years, and people have probably been enjoying them for almost as long. The earliest records we have of cultivated filberts date back to the 1500s when they graced some of the country's finest dining tables. They were also stowed aboard ships since they were one of the few nutritious foods that were guaranteed to stay fresh during the long months spent at sea.

The Kentish countryside with its warm, dry climate, is ideal for cobnuts. They are traditionally grown alongside fields of hops – another Kentish speciality – and their popularity spread in Victorian times when families made the journey out from London each autumn to pick the hops. It didn't take them long to discover the succulent, sweet taste of moist, fresh cobnuts which were growing in the hedgerows right alongside the hop fields.

The cobnut season officially starts on St Philibert's Day, August 22, when the shelves of all good greengrocers and stalls at farmers' markets throughout the country start to brim with boxes of these freshly harvested, golden-brown nuts. They're delicious eaten freshly picked in late August and early September, when they are moist with a flavour and texture similar to that of a sweet chestnut. As they turn brown later in the autumn, the flesh becomes firmer and sweeter because the starch gradually turns into sugar. Roasting brings out their unique, nutty flavour. Use them either whole or finely chopped to flavour salads, pasta, meringues, fruit crumbles or chocolatey desserts.

Where to buy

Cobnuts are widely available from local greengrocers as well as in the fresh-fruit section of many supermarkets. You can also order them online direct from Potash Farm – an organic grower of traditional Kentish cobnuts based in the West Kent village of St Mary's Platt. It's one of the few places where you can choose to

have them delivered either still in their green husks or de-husked and golden brown. They also sell cobnut oil which is perfect for drizzling over salads, grilling fish and meat or stir-frying. Plus there's a mouthwatering selection of cobnut-flavoured chutneys, fudges and delicious nut brittle. Visit kentishcobnuts.com

ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR

There are more than 20 farmers' markets in the county, all offering an array of locally grown produce and traditional Kentish specialities. Set in a Victorian railway goods shed, the Goods Shed is Canterbury's permanent market and has a mouthwatering selection of slow-proved artisan breads, smoked fish and meats and a selection of what is rapidly becoming one of Kent's most noted exports – English wine.

The annual Kent Food and Drink Festival takes place in the Dane John Gardens from Friday 23 to Sunday 25 September. Dozens of local producers offer a chance to taste their wares. You'll find delicious cheeses, award-winning farm-pressed fruit juices and more-ish Kentish ciders and perries. Plus fresh native Whitstable oysters – recognisable by their thick, heavy shells and succulent meat – Dover sole, tasty sausages and chocolatey fudges and confectionary. Also try lovely traditional products like barbecued local venison and mead, inspired by the county's rich medieval history. Visit canterburyeurofair.co.uk for more details.

