

INSIDEOUT

Our fabulous gardening, food and drinks pages. Compiled by **Tiffany Daneff**



A nutty proposition?

If you have a garden, however small, there should always be space for a nut tree

Words **Ambra Edwards** Photographs **Andrew Montgomery**

'You could say I'm nuts about nuts,'

declares Alexander Hunt of Potash Farm in Kent. Antique nutcrackers line sideboards and windowsills; office shelves groan with nut brittle and hazelnut biscuits, nut oil and nut chutney, even nut soap. He is just gathering in his 33rd commercial harvest: under a tree in his garden, two deft-fingered helpers are swiftly sorting through the morning's haul of cobnuts. (The grade-outs go north, to feed a growing population of red squirrels in the Borders.) As chairman of the Kentish Cobnut Association, Alexander, 52, is leading a revival of this traditional crop. And he is determined that we should all eat lots more nuts, and start growing them in our gardens.

'If you have a larger garden, or a paddock, a walnut makes such a graceful tree, with its stately habit and its silvery leaves. Or what about a sweet chestnut? What could be more delightful on a cold winter's night than toasting your own chestnuts on the fire? These days there are varieties that fruit within two or three years of planting.'

But these are not trees for small gardens. Here Alexander recommends almonds – not botanically nuts, he explains, but drupes, or stone fruit. Like their relatives the cherries, they are easy to train into space-saving forms such as espaliers and fans, and offer glorious early spring blossom. And no garden, he urges, is complete without a hazel – whether an ornamental form with red or purple leaves, the eccentric twisty hazel popularly known as 'Harry Lauder's Walking Stick', or a productive variety such as the traditional Kentish cobnut.

It does, he concedes, take some determination to harvest cobnuts in the garden. 'That's not because they're difficult to grow – quite the reverse,' sighs Alexander. 'It's just that there are so many garden visitors who enjoy them just as much as we do.' The sharp teeth of rabbits and mighty jaws of badgers make most efficient nut-crackers; rooks and crows swoop down to steal them, but greediest of all are the grey squirrels, who will strip a groaning tree of its entire harvest in a matter of hours.

Alexander picks some 30 acres of cobnuts

and walnuts in Kent, principally at Potash Farm near Sevenoaks. Here he has restored six acres as a traditional 'plat', or nut plantation, coaxing 100-year-old trees into abundant production, and planting some 500 new ones.

Every year is a race to get to the crop before the squirrels. In 2014, luck was with him, with the mild spring and warm summer bringing an early bumper crop of 20 tons that seemed to catch the squirrels



A CRACKING CROP

A trugful of golden-husked traditional Kentish cobnuts from Alexander Hunt's Potash Farm, near Sevenoaks. Above: a few of his beautiful antique nutcrackers

napping. Picking began at the beginning of August. With 1,500 trees at Potash Farm alone, there are too many to net. But for domestic gardeners, he counsels planting the trees close together and setting tall poles between them, from which you can drape an A-frame of fine netting, securely pegged down against marauders.

The alternative, of course, is to resign yourself to sharing your cobnuts – other nuts don't seem to have the same magnetic attraction for squirrels – and simply enjoy the charm of a traditional nuttery. The Potash Farm plantation is a bucolic spot, with long views over the North Downs. The rosy roofs of oast-houses can be glimpsed over broad hedges, fruitful with wild hazel, blackberries and sloes, which are lightly managed to encourage nesting birds. In spring the grass is spangled with primroses, bluebells and the increasingly rare early purple orchid (*Orchis mascula*). The curious parasitic toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) appears between the tree roots in April, bearing ghostly pale ▶



HAUL IN A DAY'S WORK
Sarah Mills, who helps with picking and sorting the cobnuts.
Opposite: Alexander Hunt brings in his bountiful harvest, and a cobnut (a type of hazelnut) tree

< purple flowers. The nibblings of dormice, which hibernate in the knotty trunks, are borne with delight: there is something heroic in the tiny creature's determination to feed on nuts still hanging on the tree. It reaches the kernel by nibbling a neat circular hole through the side; if the nut falls to the ground, the mouse will not retrieve it, but will start all over again.

A nuttery even of just two or three trees creates a splendid wildlife garden. Or you could take the more colourful approach espoused by Harold Nicolson at Sissinghurst Castle, who underplanted his nuttery with swathes of brilliant polyanthus.

The sharp teeth of rabbits and mighty jaws of badgers make most efficient nut-crackers; rooks and crows swoop down to steal them, but greediest of all are the grey squirrels

Growing cobnuts

Cobnuts will grow in virtually any soil that is not waterlogged, but do best on a gentle slope in light, well-drained soil. Cobnuts are self-sterile – not a problem for country dwellers, since pollen from wild hazels in nearby woods or hedgerows will likely pollinate your trees. Townsfolk, however, need to plant two compatible varieties. Alexander suggests 'Kentish Cob' as the most reliable cropper with the best flavour, with 'Gunslebert', 'Cosford' or 'Merveille de Bollwiller' for a pollinator. 'Cosford' has the finer flavour, but the other varieties offer higher yields.

Growing walnuts

Walnuts prefer deep, fertile, acid-to-neutral soil, and need plenty of room for their wide-spreading crowns – allow 7m (23ft) between trees. Where there is room for only one tree, Alexander recommends self-fertile 'Broadview', a reliable cultivar that will fruit within three to four years.

Planting and aftercare

Pot-grown trees can be planted at any time; bare-root trees must be in the ground by April. Alexander believes in pit-planting: placing the tree in a pit several inches wider and deeper than the root ball. Ensure any compacted soil is well broken up, mix a handful of bonemeal into the backfill, firm down well and water and mulch generously. Keep trees well mulched and free of weeds for at least the first three seasons, and give a light nitrogen feed in early spring. Cobnuts should be pruned every winter, to keep them low and open in shape. Walnuts, which can reach 25m (80ft), are a more tricky proposition. You'll find instructions on pruning cobnuts at kentishcobnutsassociation.org.uk or at rhs.org.uk for walnuts. ♦

GAP PHOTOS



POTASH FARM SHOP is open Sat mornings in Jan, Feb and Mar or by appointment (call 01732 882734). Or buy products at kentishcobnuts.com. Potash Farm, Comp Lane, St Mary's Platt, Nr Sevenoaks, Kent TN15 8NR

Readers can get 10% off Potash Farm's Smoky Roasted Pepper Sauce with Kentish Cobnuts and Thai Chilli Sauce with Kentish Cobnuts (RRP £6.95 each or two for £12). Call 01732 882734 or visit kentishcobnuts.com and quote code SAGA2015. Offer ends October 31, 2015.



Fancy having a crack at growing cobnuts yourself? Find out more at saga.co.uk/gardening