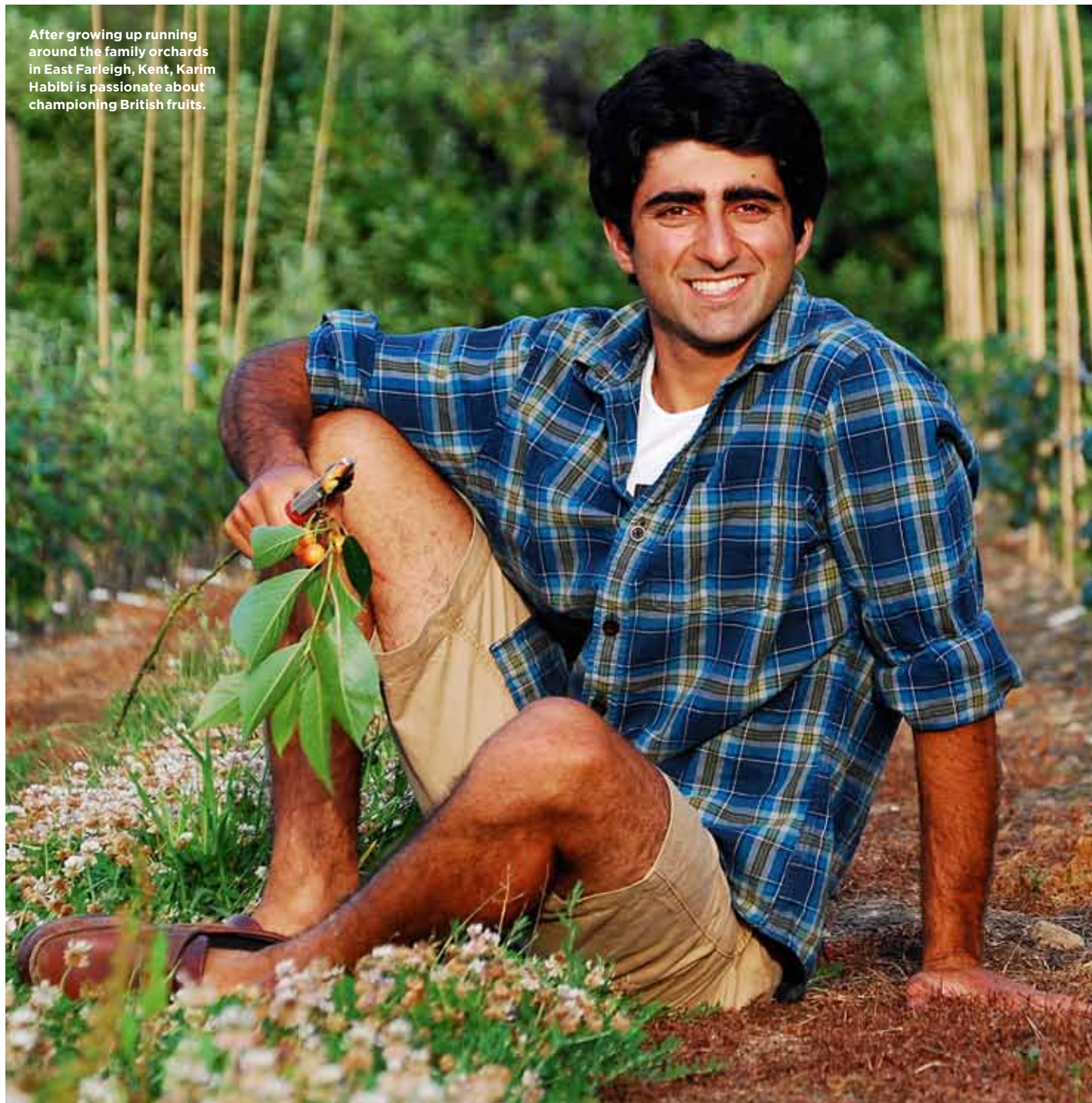


After growing up running around the family orchards in East Farleigh, Kent, Karim Habibi is passionate about championing British fruits.



THE EXPERT: ORCHARD FRUITS

FROM MELLOW MEDLARS TO SHARP QUINCES: KARIM HABIBI OF KEEPERS NURSERY TAKES US ON A CULINARY TOUR AROUND THE ORCHARD

Words: ZOË F WILLIS Photography: KARIM HABIBI

What do most people want for their 21st birthday? A sports car? A Mediterranean knees-up? In Karim Habibi's case it was a job at Keepers Nursery, a leading specialist fruit tree nursery. But its founders – Karim's parents, Sima and Hamid – were not going to hire just anybody.

The family originally came from Iran, where Karim's grandfather was in the pistachio business. It was he who planted a small Kentish orchard to celebrate the births of Karim and his brother. From these humble beginnings the nursery became one of the world's biggest collections of fruit tree varieties – 1,000 and counting – for sale to the public. The Habibis wanted a guardian, not just an employee, to ensure the future of this horticultural marvel.

Luckily Karim's passion for trees and their fruit was founded on a childhood spent in the orchards and a degree in biology from Oxford. He got the job.

Today, when not out tending to the nursery's arboreal inhabitants, Karim is keen to champion the incredible range of British fruit. "People are unfamiliar with how wonderful the fruit is," he says. "The flavours on offer are complex and rich, with the old and rare varieties in particular needing an acquired appreciation, like cheese or fine wine."

In preparation for a gastronomic exploration of the pending harvest, we asked Karim to give us a guide to start us on our way.

What orchard fruits should we try?

Each fruit has its own charm and I enjoy them all. I have my old favourites, flavours that I've known for years, but I love trying something new and unusual. For instance the greengage crop in late summer will be fantastic, while quinces and medlars are ripe in autumn.

How do British fruits differ from international ones?

Weather plays an important factor in developing flavour while the fruit matures on the trees. Over four or five centuries, farmers here have bred British autumnal varieties to need cold frosts and warm sunshine to gain a complexity of character. Therefore our native British fruits can never fulfil their potential in warmer countries like Spain.

Why is British fruit better?

Aside from the carbon footprint of fruit shipped from abroad – the price we pay for fruit out of season – those commercial types are picked before they're ripe to increase their shelf life. Also, they may have sweetness but nowhere near the depth of flavour that you get from British fruit or growing your own.

Local crops will taste different every year because of the unpredictability of the seasons in the orchards. Indeed, older apple and pear varieties improve from week to week. There are far more varieties out there than you might think, all delicious and many with a natural, unconventional beauty to them.



"There are far MORE varieties out there than you might think, all DELICIOUS and many with a NATURAL, unconventional beauty"

Can you eat greengages, quinces and medlars raw?

Greengages are magnificent when fresh as they're so sweet and juicy with a beautifully subtle fragrance. They're the taste of late July. Quinces are better cooked but you can eat some of the sweeter varieties raw. Medlars can baffle people as they're not sure when or how to eat them, but I recommend enjoying their unusual flavour when raw. On our annual Open Day we serve visitors fruit frozen the previous year at the point of ripening. People are entranced.

How do you prepare them?

Greengages are like plums; cut them in half and stone them. Treat a quince as you would a pear (they're from the same family), so peel and core them. As for medlars, pinch off the stalk and suck out the squishy brown fruit inside, but mind the pips!

What can you cook with these fruits?

A simple recipe is stewed greengages or plums with yoghurt. The sharper plum varieties are great to cook with and their burgundy colour is very striking, while the greengages create a yellow hue. You can also dry them and turn them into *lavashak*, a Persian fruit roll.

Quinces are very aromatic, strong and sharp with a woody texture that makes them excellent for cooking. Jellies and jams are their main incarnation in the UK but you can put them in savoury dishes too. They're very popular in Iranian cuisine, for example *taas kabob*, a wintery beef stew with quinces. Or try putting them in the oven with your Sunday roast for an easy compote. Why not follow with a quince crumble and cream? »

Quinces have a woody texture that's perfect for cooking – but you can eat some varieties raw if you prefer.



British varieties are tailored to our climate: they need those cold frosts and sunshine!



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Buying local, or growing your own, ensures a low carbon footprint and amazing depth of flavour.



Medlars need to ripen on the tree for a long time. Pick in November for an autumn treat.



"I believe GROWING your own FRUIT can forge close bonds with family and FRIENDS"

"Treat a quince (above, back) as you would a pear, so peel and core them. As for medlars (above, front), pinch off the stalk and suck out the squishy brown fruit inside, but mind the pips!" says Karim.

Quince cordial is also very refreshing and unusual. Just experiment with them like a pear but add more sugar, as quinces are sharper in flavour.

Medlars have a sort of autumnal, appley flavour that you can use in a tart. They don't have a strong structure but do contain pectins so you can create jellies out of them that are delicious with cheese.

What's the best way to check fruit is ripe?

If they're on the tree make sure it's the right time of year and then taste the fruits every other day around this period. Greengages are ripe in late July and August, then quinces are due in October and medlars in November.

Greengages are the easiest to check. There's a subtle blush change on the fruit and they're slightly softer to the touch. In contrast quinces are the trickiest to work out. They look ripe well before they are so you have to leave them on the tree for longer... but not too long as they'll rot from the inside out. They should smell fragrant when they're ready for harvest.

Medlars need to be left for a long time on the tree. Pick them when they're soft but eat one to test before you take them all off the tree.

How should they be stored?

You can freeze medlars and greengages (once stoned) and eat them raw as an icy treat. Once defrosted you can stew them or use them in baking. Quinces last for a few months when stored in a cool, dry place. However, all of these fruits are best preserved as jellies or jams.

Where's the best place to buy British fruit?

I love buying fruit from the side of the road or when I pass by orchards. Farmers' markets are also good places to hunt out apples, pears and greengages. Strike up a conversation with the sellers to pick up tips about when and where to find the best produce locally. Meanwhile fresh quinces and medlars are extremely elusive as they're so specialist. Borough Market in

London is probably your best bet. Nothing, however, can compare to growing your own fruit.

Can anyone grow their own fruit trees?

Yes, absolutely. To start with choose fruit that you like! Then decide what size and shape you want your fully grown tree to become. Urban gardeners, for example, might consider an espaliered tree – a two-dimensional tree grown along a wall.

You can determine the tree's vigour and size by selecting a suitable rootstock for your situation. There's a database on the Keepers Nursery website that can help you choose the best variety. Some offer better disease resistance and self fertile pollination in addition to tasty flavour and rugged beauty.

Once you've chosen your tree, plant it in winter and you'll have your first crop between three and five years later. It's worth the wait.

Flavour and beauty aside, are there other benefits?

I believe growing your own fruit can forge close bonds with family and friends. It's such a special way to enjoy food, from helping plant the tree to annual prunings and harvests, to preparing and eating the crop all together.

What's your favourite fruit and why?

My favourite is whatever's in season! During the summer I enjoy the greengage. In autumn I'm spoiled for choice. I love our mouthwatering pears, the fragrant quinces, mellow medlars... but the 600 apple varieties we have makes the decision even harder. **S**

THE HABIBI FAMILY have grown fruit trees in Kent for over 20 years. Keepers Nursery has an extensive collection and is internationally renowned for its range. Pop in on the Open Day, 29th September 2013, to choose your perfect quince, medlar or gage tree. www.keepers-nursery.co.uk