



TOP: THE CORDONED MOTHER TREES, SET OUT IN LONG ROWS, ARE THE SOURCE OF ALL THE WOOD FOR GRAFTING. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: THE DISEASE-RESISTANT CRAB APPLE 'GORGEOUS' LIVES UP TO ITS NAME, WITH PRETTY CLUSTERS OF SMALL RED FRUITS. THE NURSERY OCCUPIES A SLOPING SITE BEHIND THE HABIBIS' GEORGIAN HOME. 'LOUISE BONNE OF JERSEY' IS A DESSERT PEAR WITH EXCELLENT FLAVOUR.

A FRUITFUL BUSINESS

KEEPERS NURSERY IN KENT IS RENOWNED FOR ITS OUTSTANDING SELECTION OF FRUIT TREE CULTIVARS. DUNCAN HAYES PAYS A VISIT. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA JONES

For those in the know, Keepers Nursery is synonymous with fruit trees, but few people have actually been there. Not far from Maidstone, a small sign at the bottom of a field modestly confirms that you have arrived. Tucked behind the handsome Georgian home of owners Hamid and Sima Habibi, the nursery is an unassuming field of fresh maiden saplings, with rows of oblique cordoned mother trees languidly reclining against their supports.

Although just a small area of the 20-acre site is cultivated at any one time, the nursery holds a vast repository of fruit cultivars. In fact it is one of the best places in the UK to buy specialist trees, with probably the largest range on sale in the world. "We grow so many cultivars because we love them – no one else would be mad enough," says Hamid, to which Sima adds, "The passion is what keeps us going."

Keepers is not what you would call a conventional nursery – it is only open to the public by appointment

and nearly all of its stock is grown on site, with trees despatched seasonally as bare-root plants. "It's not that we don't like visitors," says Hamid, "it's just that everything they could want to know is on the website, unless they actually want to see the tree growing or taste its fruit."

But the wonder of Keepers is the sheer range on offer – more than 600 cultivars, including many rarities and one or two treasures, such as a favourite Iranian medlar, an unnamed cultivar of *Mespilus germanica*, which, says Hamid, "is infinitely superior to the widely known 'Nottingham'".

The nursery also has a large choice of rootstocks, with pears, plums and cherries on a selection of three roots, while the apples have six options, depending on the vigour required. This means the nursery can produce a vast number of combinations – something to suit everyone.

For Hamid and Sima, customers are vitally important, and they spend a lot of time advising people, many of



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT: THE ORCHARD TO THE REAR OF THE HOUSE. IDEAL FOR QUINCE JELLY, 'MEECHES PROLIFIC' CAN BE RELIED ON TO PRODUCE A GOOD CROP. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: SIMA DOES MOST OF THE BUD GRAFTING, DEFTLY REMOVING A PIECE OF BARK, THEN INSERTING AND SECURING THE BUD OF THE REQUIRED VARIETY. DEVELOPED IN JAPAN, 'CRISPIN' IS A LARGE, SWEET APPLE. RIGHT: SIMA AND HAMID HABIBI.

whom know little about growing fruit trees. "People are tired of the limited choice they find locally," says Hamid. "That's where we come in. For example, many people grow 'Cox's Orange Pippin', which, although a good apple, can perform poorly," he explains. "Instead we recommend 'Sunset', one of its self-fertile seedlings. Although smaller, it's tasty and aromatic, plus it's scab-resistant." This helpful attitude has ensured the nursery's steady growth, and its reputation has spread by word of mouth; it has been three years since they last advertised.

One of the most formidable tools in the nursery's arsenal is its website, a labour of love for Hamid. These days it is the nursery's principal catalogue – a comprehensive database of varieties with detailed information and real-time stock numbers. "The minute a tree is sold, the stock numbers online are adjusted, so customers can see what's actually available," says Hamid.

The Habibis got into the fruit tree business almost by accident. "Our family is from Iran, which has a heritage of families growing trees for both fruit and ornament,"



says Sima. As their boys were growing up, Sima's father decided to plant an orchard for them. To buy the trees, Sima and Hamid went to Keepers Nursery, a local business run by Mr and Mrs Cook, and were impressed with what they saw. They had been looking for a project for their recent acquisition, a redundant hop farm adjoining their house, so they teamed up with the Cooks, eventually moving the nursery. The new site proved great for fruit trees – the sandy limestone soil over a bed of clay means rain runs through the sloping site, refreshing the trees without letting them stand in water. When the Cooks retired, they passed on the baton to Hamid and Sima.

Initially it was a steep learning curve, despite Hamid's MSc in applied plant sciences. Just remembering the hundreds of cultivars seemed impossible, although, as Hamid says, "We're still learning." Sima soon got to grips with the techniques, learning how to graft from expert budder Tony Club. "You need a surgeon's skill with the knife, as well as a good back, as you're always bending."

The couple have been involved with specialist restoration projects, including the orchard at Charles Darwin's former house in Orpington, where they recommend and source historically and regionally authentic cultivars. They are also able to graft from favourite trees, either because the original is dying or because the owners are moving

house. Hamid explains to the customer which wood to cut and how to pack it to avoid damage, and within 48 hours a new grafted specimen is being nurtured in the ground, ready to grow on and offer pleasure to future generations.

While Hamid and Sima are happy with the range they offer, they are starting to grow more trained trees, such as espaliers and fans, as the trend for kitchen gardens has brought increased demand. But that seems to be as far as they want to go in developing the nursery, as there is more than enough work for them and their two full-time staff. "I think we've reached the optimum size," says Sima.

Walking through the lines of mother trees, Sima wanders off to check favourite or ailing plants, touching them with real feeling. While she does this, Hamid explains that the most common mistake people make is to be afraid of pruning their trees. "It is vital not to be scared," he says, "particularly in the formative years when pruning dictates what shape the tree will take." If you need help, he recommends referring to a reputable pruning book. When I ask why they haven't written a manual on fruit trees themselves, Hamid responds wryly, "The website is our book." ■

Keepers Nursery is open all year, by appointment only. Open days are held at blossom and fruiting times – for details call 01622 726465. For varieties and stock, see www.keepers-nursery.co.uk



TOP: ALTHOUGH ONLY A SMALL PART OF THE SITE IS CULTIVATED AT ANY ONE TIME, THE NURSERY STOCKS AN INCREDIBLE 600 FRUIT CULTIVARS. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: HAMID RECOMMENDS THE DAMSON 'SHROPSHIRE PRUNE' FOR ITS FLAVOUR. 'GREENGAGE' IS A SWEET-TASTING CULTIVAR OF PLUM. THE COOKING PEAR 'DOUBLE DE GUERRE' PRODUCES VERY COLOURFUL FRUITS.