



Karim by wall-trained 'Red Falstaff' AGM apples on the side of his family home at the nursery



GREAT BRITISH GROWERS

“Autumn is when I rest and enjoy what we’ve achieved”

Karim Habibi is keeping alive the family tradition by supplying a vast range of quality fruit trees at Keepers Nursery in Kent, says Phil Clayton

Photography: Tim Sandall

For many nursery owners, winter represents a period of calm after the hectic growing season, but not for Karim Habibi of renowned fruit tree specialists Keepers Nursery in Kent. “Winter is completely manic. I work 70-hour weeks, getting up at 5am, lifting trees and packing orders. It’s cold, but I’m too busy to notice,” says Karim.

The nursery and his home are set on the upper slopes of the Medway Valley – the elevated position offering handsome panoramas and good conditions for fruit. Started by Karim’s parents in the 1990s, Keepers soon built a reputation for quality and the wide range on offer. “They focused on obtaining different selections, many rare, heritage ones, which was unusual for the time,” he says. Some came via NIAB East Malling, the agricultural research institute, but also from further afield, including Iran, reflecting the family’s heritage and because fruit trees are important in Persian gardens.

Hamid, Karim’s father, was also an early adopter of e-commerce and with Richard Borrie – an early customer – he set up their first website and online catalogue in 1998. “We used to send out almost 10,000 trees a year, including

two-year-old trained plants, which take longer to produce,” says Karim.

He learned the ropes from his dad while mum Sima was an expert at chip-budding – a type of grafting. After his father died in 2019, Karim had to make decisions fast, but with Richard Borrie’s help, he decided to carry on the business, downsizing to allow time to ease into the job.

Karim runs through his year. “In March I start planting trees by hand. I did 2,500 on Mothering Sunday last year – just me and a friend. Summer is all about chip-budding – we collect the budwood and graft onto rootstocks growing in the field. In August I graft up to 600 every day. In all it takes 3–4 weeks, but it’s really weather dependant. Late summer and autumn are when I rest and enjoy all we’ve achieved,” he says. »

Nursery info

Name: Keepers Nursery.

Location: Lower Road, East Farleigh, Maidstone, Kent ME15 0JS.

Started: In 1993, when Hamid and Sima Habibi planted a collection of fruit on land once used for growing hops. Karim took over in 2019, after his father’s death, and lives on-site with his wife and children.

Plants: The UK’s widest range of fruit trees: nearly 1,200 different apples, pears, plums and cherries; less-often-grown quince, medlar and mulberry; modern and heritage selections; and new, exclusive seedling cultivars, maiden (untrained, one-year-old) trees, espalier or fan-trained plants.

Customers: Amateur growers and fruit-tree enthusiasts.

Opening times: Trees can be collected from the nursery by appointment. Mail-order plants sold online for mid-November to mid-March delivery.

Web: keepers-nursery.co.uk

Social media: @keepersnursery (Instagram) @keepersnurserykarim (YouTube)

Telephone: 01622 326465

Email: helpdesk@keepers-nursery.co.uk

Recently grafted rootstocks growing in rows, ready for sale next winter



It's apple season in October. The stock plants that provide propagation material are grafted onto 'M26' or 'M9' rootstocks and set in rows of cordon trees, beside which are fields containing sale plants at various stages of growth. Walking along the ranks of dessert apples, Karim tastes fruit along the way. The diversity in flavour of the apples is remarkable. A heritage cultivar from the 18th century, appropriately named 'Pitmaston Pine Apple', is a small, yellow-green, russeted fruit with a flavour rather like that of pineapple. "It's an appealing apple that's really fun to have and it's also easy to grow – people always want to taste it," says Karim.

One of his favourites, RubINETTE ('Rafzubin'), looks like 'Cox's Orange Pippin', one of the parents of this Swiss-bred cultivar – the other is 'Golden Delicious'. The superb flavour of this offspring eclipses both – it's intensely honeyed, almost wine-like, with yellowish flesh.

With its bright red fruits, 'Shenandoah', an American cultivar bred in the 1940s, looks like the sort of apple you can imagine Snow White biting into – too good to be true. But its flavour is delicious with crisp, juicy flesh. Karim feels it's one that should be better known, producing good crops on a moderately vigorous tree. A more recently-introduced apple, but similarly-coloured is 'Red Devil', which has surprising, pretty pink flesh once bitten into. "Apples with coloured flesh are proving popular at the moment – 'Red Devil' has quite good flavour and we find it disease

resistant. It's also self-fertile, so is a great choice for people with smaller gardens," says Karim.

He points out golden-yellow 'Freyberg', which has a delicious, sweet flavour – initially like the taste of pear drops – and firm white flesh. "This apple was raised in New Zealand in 1934 by James Kidd, who was an important breeder. It's probably my favourite for late October," says Karim. We head next for pinkish-red-fruited 'Rubinola', among his father's favourite apples. It's a modern cultivar developed in the Czech Republic and introduced in 1997. The glossy, round, bright red fruit have a nice crunch, with sweet, melting flesh. It crops well and is disease resistant, making a good choice for organic gardeners. Karim then moves onto an apple with orange-red, russeted skin – 'Norfolk Royal Russet', which tastes superb. "Russets such as this and better-known 'Egremont Russet' AGM have a rich, complex flavour, particularly when compared to sweet, American-bred apples, which tend to be red and shiny but often with little in the way of taste. I think this is a really good apple – the amount of russetting varies, and its flesh is fluffy and light, yet crunchy," he says.

There are culinary apples too. Impressive 'Reverend W. Wilks' is an Edwardian cooking apple, introduced in 1908 and named after a past RHS Secretary, with large, yellow-green orange-striped fruits on a disease-resistant compact tree. It's ideal for baking or stewing and sweet enough without added sugar. Another with RHS links is »

Six of Karim's favourites



Malus domestica 'Norfolk Royal Russet' has fluffy and light flesh



M. domestica 'Egremont Russet' AGM is popular for its rich flavour



M. domestica 'Rubinola' has crunchy, disease-resistant fruits



M. domestica Nuvar Golden Hills has golden yellow, sweet fruit



M. domestica RubINETTE ('Rafzubin') has a honey-like taste



Malus 'Wisley Crab' produces large pink-fleshed crab apples



Bountiful rows of apple trees in Karim's nursery fields situated on the picturesque slopes of Kent's Medway Valley

“In March I start planting trees in the ground – I did 2,500 on Mothering Sunday”



Trees trained as espaliers and cordons line track pathways (far left) at the nursery. Unusually, this beautiful fragrant quince 'Iranian' (left), which Karim's father brought to the UK, is also suitable for eating raw, straight from the tree



Medlar 'Iranian' AGM

“In August, I graft up to 600 trees each day”



In autumn Karim enjoys harvesting apples with his son, who loves to help

‘Wisley Crab’, with large dark red, pink-fleshed crab apples that make good jelly. “It’s self-fertile and a great plant to use as a pollinator – the flowers are deep pink and it’s leaves are purple-flushed when they emerge,” says Karim.

By this time in October, plums, cherries and apricots are long-gone, and many of the pears are over, but we approach a spreading tree with arching growth bearing narrow leaves, among them small brownish fruit. This is a medlar (*Mespilus germanica*). Grown for centuries, these unusual fruits are eaten once they have ‘bletted’ (become overripe) after being stored indoors, and the trees are highly ornamental, bearing large pink-white flowers and attractive autumn tints. This selection, named ‘Iranian’ AGM, was introduced to the UK by Karim’s dad and has tasty, small fruit that can be picked or left to ripen on the tree. There are quince (*Cydonia oblonga*) too – among the most beautiful fruit, if not the most versatile, they generally need

cooking to be edible. Passing selections such as ‘Meech’s Prolific’ and heavy-cropping ‘Serbian Gold’ AGM, Karim stops at an established tree of a cultivar also named ‘Iranian’, and picks two large, golden pear-shaped fruits. “This is another that

Dad brought over – you can eat the fruit raw,” says Karim, smiling.

It’s impossible not to be impressed by the nursery and the way Karim has confidently taken on the mantle – he is now also a member of the RHS Fruit, Vegetable and Herb Committee. Watching him with his young son, tasting and collecting fruit, it’s clear that this particular apple has not fallen far from the tree – to the benefit of all who love growing and eating orchard fruits. ○

Green credentials

As a mail-order-only nursery supplying field-grown, bare-root trees, the use of disposable plastic and compost is minimal. In the packing shed, trees are sent out in cardboard boxes, and on the nursery they use biodegradable budding tape (below) for propagation. All canes needed to support the young field-grown trees are re-used, and these plants are only irrigated when recently budded. Keepers have also played a key role in the preservation of many rare historic fruit selections, supplying trees for garden restoration projects around the UK.



Phil Clayton is a member of the RHS Herbaceous Plant Committee and author of *Parched*