

Jeepers KEEPERS

Visitors to this Kent-based, family run fruit nursery will be wowed by the choice of hundreds of cultivars and expert advice from its passionate owners

PHOTOGRAPHS SUZIE GIBBONS | WORDS SUE BRADLEY

Few things beat the taste of juicy, sun-ripened fruit picked fresh from the tree. It's a simple pleasure that Hamid Habibi and his wife Sima Morshed get to enjoy over several months

every year. With no fewer than 600 apple cultivars, 100 pears, numerous cherries and plums, and a multitude of more unusual fruits from which to choose at Keepers Nursery in Kent, they are spoilt for choice. Based within 20 acres of former hop gardens in the picturesque Medway Valley near Maidstone, the couple has been helping gardeners to experience the joy of growing their own fruit for just over two decades.

The business started during the early years of the revival of interest in traditional varieties - this was in reaction to the mediocre range available on supermarket shelves. Today Hamid and Sima, aided by son Karim, grow hundreds of heritage apple cultivars, including many with wonderfully historic



names, including 'Ashmead's Kernel', 'Peasgood's Nonsuch', and the 'Bloody Ploughman', and pear cultivars such as 'Black Worcester' and the large and once-popular 'Marguerite de Marillat'.

Customers who value the couple's experience and expertise include The National Trust, which regularly consults them over old cultivars of fruit trees suitable for restoration projects at period properties, such as Cliveden House near Maidenhead and Clumber Park at Worksop, as well as heritage varieties native to certain regions.

'In the old days, cultivars were often bred to cope with certain conditions: trees developed in the West Country are more suited to a wetter environment, while Scottish cultivars are especially hardy,' explains Hamid.

Other prestigious locations to which Keepers Nursery supplies trees include Hampton Court Palace, which took delivery of several plum ►

LEFT The flushed-red crab apple *Malus domestica* 'Nuvar Red Lantern' - good for making jelly. **ABOVE** The owners of Keepers Nursery, Hamid Habibi and Sima Morshed.



ABOVE FROM LEFT Aromatic 'Red Windsor' - sweet and disease resistant; one of the finest dessert pears, *Pyrus communis* 'Beurre Hardy', originating from France in the 1820s; historical variety 'Black Worcester' - one of the best cooking pears. **BELOW** Apple cordons heavy with fruit, ready to be picked.

and pear trees for its walled garden.

While Hamid and Sima have played a vital role in helping to build up stocks of heritage varieties, they also stock many of the modern cultivars bred for disease resistance as well as flavour, and actively encourage their customers to consider these cultivars when deciding which fruit trees they want to grow in their gardens.

'If I had to name my favourite apple, I would have to say a sun-ripened 'Cox's Orange Pippin' picked fresh from the tree, although it's a terrible apple to try to grow in a garden due to disease and other

problems,' Hamid explains. 'Many people don't want to use chemicals in their gardens and, even for those who do, those that are available are of very limited use. We encourage people who like 'Cox's Orange Pippin' to try modern varieties such

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as 'Sunset' or 'Red Windsor', which have the same flavour. These are now among our bestsellers, along with 'Egremont Russet', the early fruiting 'Scrumptious', 'Red Falstaff', 'Rajka', 'Topaz' and 'Bramley'.

Keepers sells cultivars on a variety

of rootstocks. This gives customers a range of options in terms of how they grow their fruit, whether it's as low step-overs, espaliers, fans or full-size goblet-shaped specimens. Growing top fruit in a smaller garden is made possible if customers select dwarf and wall-trained trees.

For planting in winter, they are available as year-old 'maidens', which gardeners can then train themselves, or as two-year-old plants that are already in the process of being trained. Almost all of the 10,000 plants produced at Keepers every year are grown from bud grafts, taken from the nursery's collection

of 900 'mother trees' - although the family also offers a special service through which they propagate new plants from any material that is sent to them by their customers.

'It could be an old variety of which very few trees are left, or a special tree planted by someone's grandfather that they want to preserve for future generations,' says Hamid. 'Bud grafting is physically very hard; you need a very strong back and to be skilled and delicate with a knife. It is something you build up with practice: the more accurate you are, the better the result will be.'

Running a nursery in the 'Garden of England' may seem quite far removed from the Middle East, where Hamid and Sima were born, but they both say that fruit trees have always been part of their culture. 'I have always had an interest in growing fruit - we're both from Iran and, like many things, fruit growing originates from that part of the world,' says Hamid, who has a post-graduate degree in applied plant sciences.

Keepers Nursery was originally started up by a retired East Malling Research Station employee called Mike Cook, in response to frequent requests to propagate fruit trees that people could not get hold of.



'Since taking it over about 20 years ago,' says Hamid, 'we've produced a large range of varieties, including many of the more unusual as well as the popular ones.'

Hamid's advice to those considering planting fruit trees is to make sure to choose cultivars suited to their particular climate. And he stresses the value of good pruning. 'The biggest mistake people make when planting trees is that they fail to prune them,' he explains. 'Formative pruning in the first few years is particularly important. It determines the eventual shape of the tree, and it is essential for creating one that is both attractive and productive.'

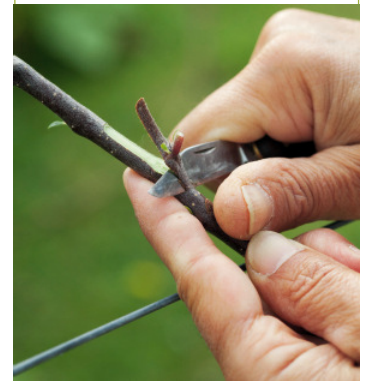
When asked what his favourite fruit is, Hamid is quick to recommend a French pear called 'Beurre Hardy'. He describes it as having a soft, buttery texture that's very different from crunchy and grainy pears such as 'Conference'.

This is a man who knows his fruit and how to share the flavours in words - an essential skill for helping his customers to make the right choice at any time of the year.

Keepers Nursery, Gallants Court, East Farleigh, Maidstone, Kent ME15 0LE. Visit the nursery to find out more about

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Scottish *Malus domestica* 'Galloway Pippin' - quite a sharp flavour, best for cooking; mottled red 'Peasgood's Nonsuch' originates from Lincolnshire; a lovely colourful selection of apples. **LEFT** *Pyrus communis* 'Marguerite de Marillat', of French origin, was once a popular dessert pear. **BELOW** A path leads the way through the orchard, with views across Kent.

BUD GRAFTING



The grafting technique uses buds as opposed to shoots to allow a good fruiting variety, the scion, to benefit from the vigour and resilience of the root system of a stock tree. A dormant side bud of the scion is grafted onto the stem of the stock, which is encouraged to grow by pruning off the stem just above the newly grafted bud.

