



Keepers Nursery owners Hamid and Sima Habibi (left) are planning to increase their collection of 600 fruit trees still further. They are pictured with a promising new un-named apple cultivar that has crisp, well-flavoured fruits similar to a 'Braeburn' with promising disease resistance. Rows of cordons (right) have been established on land occupied by a former hop farm that the couple bought in the early 1990s



Finding Keepers

An enormous range of heritage and unusual fruit cultivars can be found at Keepers Nursery in Kent. However, owners Hamid and Sima Habibi are not content to stop there. ROY LANCASTER samples a selection of their ever-expanding collection of orchard and top fruit from all corners of the globe, including their native Iran

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM SANDALL

ONE OF MY treasured memories of a visit in 1972 to northern Iran is the two days I spent in the forests above the Caspian Sea. These ancient woods are full of hardy ornamental plants including cyclamen and parrotias but it was the wealth of fruit trees, apparently wild, that most interested me.

In the forest was a wild form of *Ficus carica* (fig) and *Diospyros lotus* (date plum), while *Punica granatum* (pomegranate) and *Mespilus germanica* (medlar) occurred in the sunnier, marginal scrub along the shore. I found the local medlars most puzzling, for the dense, bushy, thorny branched and small-fruited shrubs I saw there seemed to have little in common with the smooth-branched, large-

leaved and fruited versions in cultivation.

I was reminded of this last October when visiting Keepers Nursery at East Farleigh near Maidstone in Kent. Situated close to the M20 in the so-called Garden of England, the nursery specialises in fruit trees including many traditional English cultivars. According to Keeper's impressive list, more than 600 cultivars are grown which, the owners say, represents the largest range of fruit trees currently offered for sale in Britain.

Hamid Habibi and his wife Sima Morshed-Habibi bought the land in the early 1990s. A redundant hop farm, it is on sandy limestone soil (Hythe beds) over clay. Mike Cook, formerly of East Malling Research Station, set up the Keepers Nursery business in the

mid 1970s. It then transferred to its present 8-ha (20-acre) site to help cope with the increasing demand which continues today. Initially, Mike went into partnership with the Habibis for two years before retiring.

Enormous selection

Trees are grown on a variety of rootstocks to suit demand and are supplied bare-rooted between mid-November and mid-March. They can be delivered or collected from the nursery and the choice is huge – apples (about 400 cultivars); more than 100 cultivars of pear, plum, damson and greengage; many different crab apples, cherries, nectarines, peaches and apricots; mulberries, quinces, medlars and other less-common fruits.

Born and brought up in Iran, the Habibis also grow fruit trees from their native country. Hamid enthusiastically described *Crataegus azarolus*, a hawthorn long grown in south-east Europe and western Asia for its large red or yellow succulent haws, and *Cornus mas* (Cornelian cherry) which is popular in Iran for its red fruits that are sold in markets there, especially in Tehran for use in preserves and syrups. He also pointed out an un-named golden-fruited *Cydonia oblonga* (quince), long grown in Iran, and another named 'Isfahan'. In total, some nine quince cultivars are grown including large-fruited 'Vranja' and copiously-cropping, American-raised 'Meech's Prolific' 3 – one of the best for general cultivation and ornamental, too.

Recommended medlars

I then asked Hamid whether he grew such medlars as 'Nottingham'. He raised his eyes and patiently explained to me that he finds 'Nottingham' the least satisfying of the medlars. 'When will people stop recommending it on *Gardeners' Question Time*?' he moans. Compared with other cultivars, its fruits rot rather than ripen.

So which cultivars would he recommend? Hamid led me to the nursery's selection that included *Mespilus germanica* 'Bredase Reus', 'Dutch', 'Royal', 'Westerveld', 'Macrocarpa', and an un-named cultivar from Iran 4 with narrow leaves and small, top-shaped fruits.

As my visit was in early autumn, the fruits of these medlars were not yet ripe, so Hamid

definitely picked a few of each and urged me to let them ripen naturally in a basket or bowl kept at room temperature. They took ages to ripen but it was worth the wait, for when they did their delicious, smooth, creamy consistency exorcised all thoughts of medlar 'Nottingham' from my mind.

I am so used to meeting gardeners and specialist growers who are excited about ornamentals that I hadn't considered that fruit growers, too, might be infected with the same passion. It came as both a surprise and a delight to hear Hamid extolling the virtues of first one fruit then another, his personal recommendations interspersed with cautionary remarks where a cultivar failed to live up to his ideal. ➤



1 A first-class apple for a small garden is compact-growing 'Sunset'. This self-fertile seedling of 'Cox's Orange Pippin' is much more reliable with juicy and aromatic, flushed fruits. The cultivar was developed in Kent in 1918



2 Rarely grown 'Gavin' is an excellent apple with crisp, sweet, dark red fruit and has the added bonus of scab resistance. It hails from Hertfordshire, from 1956. It is self-sterile, so requires a pollinator such as 'Laxton's Superb'



3 *Cydonia oblonga* (quince) makes an attractive tree for a small garden with pink-tinted blossom in spring, and large, scented fruits in late autumn, that can be cooked and eaten. 'Meech's Prolific' (above) is a self-fertile cultivar from the USA



4 Similar to quinces, medlars make fine garden trees. Fruits are smaller and eaten only when fully mature, and were popular in the Middle Ages. This unusual un-named cultivar is from Hamid and Sima's native Iran



5 Attractive 'Pitmaston Pine Apple' is an old cultivar dating from 1785 from Herefordshire. This self-sterile dessert apple produces small, yellow fruits tasting strongly of pineapple, but needs a pollinator such as 'James Grieve'



6 Fruits of late-cropping dessert apple 'Falstaff' are crisp, juicy, attractive and particularly flavoursome, produced on compact, heavy-cropping, partially self-fertile trees. This cultivar is easy to grow and originated in Kent in 1965

Hamid was at his most critical when describing apples, listing their qualities and their failings much as a teacher might his pupils, all the while selecting samples for me to taste or to take back home for my family's enjoyment and opinions.

Aromatic qualities

Hamid gained a post graduate degree in Applied Plant Sciences at Wye College and the first apple he planted when he moved to Kent more than 20 years ago was dessert 'Lord Lambourne' which is a favourite still, enjoyed for its sweet, juicy, crisp apples.

Much as he admires 'Cox's Orange Pippin' he was anxious that I tried its seedling 'Sunset' **1** – earlier, easier, scab resistant and ideal for an average garden. It has smaller fruit than its mother but is every bit as aromatic and with a strong flavour.

Another of his recommendations came from HRI East Malling in Kent. 'Falstaff' **6**, a hybrid between 'James Grieve' and 'Golden Delicious', has an attractive red-flushed and striped fruit and a juicy, crispy, fruity flesh.

Small-fruited but with a golden skin and a rich, honey-sweet, nutty flesh is 'Pitmaston Pine Apple' **5**, raised in Herefordshire circa 1785 and another of Hamid's favourites, as is 'Gavin' **2** raised by Gavin Brown at the John Innes Centre, Norwich in 1956. This dessert cultivar is a heavy cropper, producing crisp

ESTABLISHING A HERITAGE FRUIT COLLECTION AT KEEPERS NURSERY



The fruit collection, rigorously labelled and maintained, includes cherries (above), pears, damsons, plums, greengages, crab apples, nectarines, peaches, apricots and soft fruit

When my wife Sima and I first became involved in Keepers Nursery more than 10 years ago, it was already known for its extensive range of fruit trees. As fruit enthusiasts we appreciated the valuable role the nursery was playing in preserving the heritage of old and unusual fruit cultivars, and were keen to continue and build on this tradition.

Our most important task was to establish our own collection. We are now planning to increase this to more than 1,000 cultivars, probably making it the largest collection in the country after the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale. To ensure authenticity, we have sourced most of the plants as grafting material from established major collections at Brogdale and RHS Garden Wisley, but also carry out our own checks on the fruit, comparing them with descriptions in literature.

We produce trees on a wide range of rootstocks to suit different situations. For example, apples are grown on six different rootstocks from extremely dwarfing to the most vigorous. Keepers is unusual in that a large number of our trees including pears, plums and cherries as well as apples are supplied on vigorous rootstocks – these are in demand from customers planting or restoring old-fashioned orchards.

One of our greatest pleasures is to wander through the collection in the fruit season, enjoying the different colours, shapes and flavours. Seeing this wonderful diversity of fruit and the stark contrast with the lack of choice in the shops reinforces our wish to help preserve it and help others enjoy it.
HAMID HABIBI
Proprietor

fruits of good flavour with a rose stain in the outer flesh when eaten.

For those gardeners fond of dessert apples of honeyed sweet flavour I can recommend Dutch cultivar 'Elstar', which I also found to be crisp and juicy. From Germany, meanwhile, comes 'Horneburger Pfannkuchen' known as the 'pancake apple of Horneburg' for its use there in cooking. The huge fruits are similar in some respects to 'Bramley's Seedling', but are less juicy and acidic. They make an excellent sauce, as my wife Sue can testify, and keep well when stored. They can even be stored and eaten as a dessert apple from Christmas onwards.

I was introduced to many heritage English cultivars during a tour of the nursery which was in impeccable order. Names such as 'Striped Beefing', 'Hawthornden', 'Warner's King', 'Nonpareil', 'Ashmead's Kernel', 'Catshead' and the ladies' favourite 'D'Arcy Spice', all 18th-century or earlier, rolled off Hamid's tongue as we moved between the rows. However, at the end of the day, it was an un-named mystery seedling of more recent origin that left me gasping.

The Habibis could not remember how this apple came to be in their collection and could not match it with any other they grew or knew. A dessert cultivar, it had rich rose-red fruits with crisp, firm, juicy flesh of an excellent flavour, not unlike a 'Braeburn'.

A good cropper, attractive and enjoyable to eat, this apple is also showing promising disease resistance as a bonus.

Impeccable organisation

Everything about Keepers Nursery is well organised. The rows of fruit trees have a well-groomed appearance; each tree in each row is individually labelled with its name, rootstock type and date of budding. All are budded by Sima – a skill she had to learn – usually in late July and early August.

Most of the Habibis' customers are private individuals countrywide and the nursery is only open by appointment. However, they also supply local authorities and restoration projects for both English Heritage and the National Trust including Charles Darwin's garden at Down House in Kent.

Sima and Hamid also offer an important conservation service, propagating old or historical fruit trees in private gardens, and will propagate-to-order cultivars outside their normal range using budwood from major collections such as at RHS Garden Wisley and the Brogdale Horticultural Trust.

The nursery operates an advisory service that is greatly appreciated, especially by new customers. Beginner gardeners and first-time growers will find the Habibis' recommendations and guidance helpful and reassuring, as technical considerations such as suitable

rootstocks and pollinators can be confusing. And in most years Keepers hold an apple-tasting day in late October.

At a time when Britain's ancient orchards and heritage fruit cultivars are continually under threat from building projects, neglect, plain ignorance or bureaucracy, the Habibis and others like them are performing sterling work in conserving and propagating our fruit-tree heritage, and long may it be so. 🍏

ROY LANCASTER VMH, plantsman, lecturer, writer and broadcaster, is a member of RHS Floral Committee B

FURTHER INFORMATION

Keepers Nursery
Gallants Court, East Farleigh, Maidstone, Kent ME15 0LE
Tel/fax: (01622) 726465
E-mail: (sales@keepers-nursery.co.uk)
Website: (www.fruittree.co.uk)
Open: by appointment only
Location: From M20 junction 5 turn right at the roundabout, left at the traffic lights, continue past Maidstone Hospital, through Barming, and over some level crossings and a narrow bridge at East Farleigh. Turn right at the top of the hill, left into Gallants Lane and Gallants Court is 50 yards on the right
Facilities: toilets, no refreshment facilities. The nursery is not suitable for wheelchairs
Mail order: available
Catalogue: Please send two 1st-class stamps