

## A FEW WORDS ON FRUIT

In the UK about 61% of our fruit and vegetables is imported. The Government are relaxed about this situation and there is no drive for self-sufficiency. A long time ago we grew 100% of our needs – but that was before we imported citrus fruits and bananas and other fruit and vegetables which are hard to grow in our climate. The consumer these days wants to eat fruit and vegetables which are out-of-season, eg strawberries and French beans every month of the year. The Government do not appear to recognise the conflict between their policy of reducing carbon emissions to save the planet on the one hand and a policy of allowing 39% of our fruit and vegetables to be transported by air or sea by carbon-emitting aircraft and ships on the other. In my view there should be a food-mile tax on imports to shift the balance towards local production.

What about fruit on its own? Here the situation is utterly ludicrous – 94% of our fruit is imported. One can agree with the importation of citrus fruits, bananas and a few others which cannot be grown in the UK (other than in hothouses). But as for the rest, British apples and pears are among the best in the World and strawberries and raspberries grow easily in our climate. For the supermarkets it is all down to price - if it is cheaper to import, they import. Our farmers have had to grub up their fruit trees and bushes and grow something else.

What can we as individuals do? It is staggeringly easy to grow fruit, and if you grow your own they can be entirely free of pesticides. (Commercially-grown fruit cannot be grown to meet supermarket appearance standards and be bug-free unless they are sprayed heavily with pesticides.) One does of course need a fair amount of space to grow top fruit such as apples and pears but it is well worth the effort – and half-standard, dwarf, espalier and cordon versions are available to economise on space. In general it takes fruit trees and bushes about 3 years to produce fruit in quantity, so one needs to take a long-term view. It is best to plant out new trees and bushes in the dormant months; I consider 1<sup>st</sup> November to be ideal to let the roots settle in before growth re-starts in the spring. Fruit trees and bushes should be well-watered the first summer, even in rainy periods, since they can easily dry out and die. After the first summer they can be left to their own devices, apart from judicious pruning.

An unfortunate fact about modern varieties of fruit tree and fruit bush is that generally they do not have a long life. They succumb to one disease or another after 10 to 20 years. However, one can turn that to one's advantage. New varieties are coming on to the market all the time which are more productive or more delicious or both. So one can take advantage of older trees and bushes dying by replacing them with better, newer varieties. An example of new varieties is the remarkable Josta, a cross between a blackcurrant and a gooseberry, the fruit being very large blackcurrants. Before the Josta I planted blackcurrant bushes on the allotment but soon lost them to big bud. (The big bud mite invades the buds, changing their shape from rugby-ball to foot-ball and bringing a virus which causes the blackcurrant bush to revert to its wild, fruitless form.) I grubbed up my blackcurrants and replaced them, with the same result. The allotments were infested with the big bud mite. Then I discovered the Josta – which is unaffected by big bud. Hey Presto! I had enormous crops of “blackcurrants” from vigorous bushes which grew up to 8 feet high. That is a good example of how nurseries are producing fruit trees and bushes which are vastly superior to those of the past. And that is without genetic modification – simple, traditional hybridisation is used to produce far better fruit trees and bushes. If you already grow your own fruit trees and bushes and the results are not too good, think of grubbing them up and replacing them with modern varieties. (It is, of course, unwise to plant for example an apple tree in exactly the same spot vacated by a predecessor apple, but if you have a big sort-out every 3 to 4 years you should be able to ensure that a species does not follow the same species.)

Propagation of fruit bushes is simple. In late autumn take a 15 inch length of new wood, place it in the ground with only 3 inches above the soil and leave it for a year. Plant out the resulting bush in its final position. Climbers such as tayberries can be layered (stick one end of the new growth in the soil), raspberries will put out runners as will strawberries, and rhubarb plants can be subdivided. You may be able to scrounge cuttings, etc from friends but only accept them if the plants are of good varieties.

Top fruit require complicated grafting onto dwarf rootstocks and that may not be worthwhile for the amateur gardener.

What do I grow? Currently I grow successfully 20 types of fruit and, for some of them, more than one variety. Altogether I have 105 fruit trees and bushes and 132 strawberry plants. I grow eating apples, cooking apples, pears, plums, gooseberries, tayberries, summer raspberries, autumn raspberries, strawberries, Jostas, redcurrants, rhubarb, dessert grapes, winemaking grapes, figs, peaches, blueberries, apricots, cherries and cob nuts. I am also growing the following which have yet to reach maturity and bear fruit: gogi berries, cranberries and pomegranates. I am about to plant out an olive, a paw paw and a smooth-skinned kiwi called *actinidia arguta*. I am having difficulty with pot-grown oranges and lemons which find our winters, even in the greenhouse, too cold for their liking. I have stopped growing blackcurrants, whitecurrants, walnuts, mulberries, normal kiwi fruit, greengages and damsons. I have already covered blackcurrants. The whitecurrants were very similar to redcurrants and did not seem to be worth growing. The walnut (*Juglans Nigra*) was given to me the size of a long pencil. After 17 years it had grown to 30 feet and produced its first crop of walnuts – which were inedible so the tree was caressed with my chainsaw. The mulberry was grown in a very large pot for 12 years and produced no fruit. I planted it out on the allotment and after a further 5 years it grew vigorously and produced fruit. However, they did not taste particularly nice and were subjected to severe attacks by insects so the mulberry was caressed by the chainsaw. I successfully grew a male and a female kiwi fruit in the greenhouse and they produced fruit of commercial size and quality. However, they grew too vigorously, took over the greenhouse and had to be turfed out. I then tried a variety outdoors which was supposed to be self-fertile and to produce small fruit. After 5 years of reasonably vigorous growth against a sunny wall it still had not produced fruit so it was turfed out. As for the greengage and the damson, after about 10 years of producing fruit they developed silver leaf disease (as did my first Victoria plum) which killed them. With fruit you win some and you lose some. The key is to grow many different types so that you have plenty of winners.

Now to the controversy over rhubarb – is it a fruit or a vegetable? I apply the custard test: if one can eat it with custard it is a fruit!

Happy gardening!

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