



MR BRAMLEY'S APPLE

Why has 'Bramley's Seedling' become the quintessential English cooking apple? **Joan Morgan** investigates this cultivar's enduring appeal after 200 years and highlights some of the many other British 'cookers' available



Original Bramley tree



Henry Merryweather

FORMAN AND SONS, HORTICULTURAL PRINTERS, NOTTINGHAM.



APPLE 'BRAMLEY'S SEEDLING' celebrates its bicentenary this year. Not only does it remain our best known culinary cultivar but, astonishingly, the original mother tree continues to grow and fruit in Southwell, near Nottingham. This tree was raised by Mary Anne Brailsford who, as a child, sowed a few apple pips in a pot in about 1809. One of these pips grew into a vigorous sapling which was planted in the family garden. The tree had been cropping for some years when, in around 1857, it caught the eye of Henry Merryweather, who recognised a potential winner for his fledgling nursery business. By then, the property and tree were owned by Mr Bramley, a local butcher, who gave graftwood to Merryweather, and his name to the new apple. Sales of grafted trees began in 1862.

By the turn of the 19th century, 'Bramley's Seedling' (often shortened to Bramley) was widely planted in commercial orchards. It helped establish the modern British fruit industry and is a mainstay of today's market orchard.

Affection for 'Bramley's Seedling' and its reputation is such that trees are

planted by nostalgic Britons and fruit enthusiasts across the world from southern Spain to California and even Japan. However, the mere fact that 'Bramley's Seedling' is still on sale on supermarket shelves is in many ways more remarkable than this international interest. 'Bramley's Seedling' is a Victorian culinary apple and thus much too sharp to eat fresh with pleasure. Yet, despite our rumoured disinclination to cook, it finds a market year round.

English cooking apples

No other country developed a whole group of large, acidic apples specifically for use in the kitchen, as Britain did during the 19th century. Then, the essential requirement for a good 'cooker' was that it would 'fall', that is, cook to a juicy, sharp, smooth and lump-free purée. Generally, the more acidic the apple, the more easily this is achieved. It was the key to perfect apple sauce and, equally, it made an ideal baked apple – the best way to savour the individual flavours of the dozens of different 'cookers' then grown.

The British did not favour the

American notion of an apple pie that calls for pieces of apple to spike with a fork, nor the French style with its decorative topping of apple slices, both of which require an apple that keeps its shape when cooked and are therefore less acidic than a proper 'cooker'. Whether the preferences or the apples came first is an open question but 'Bramley's Seedling', with the highest acidity levels of any 'cooker' in my experience, passed the English tests with honours. Plentiful acidity also ensured its continuing use, for the brisk fruity taste comes zinging through regardless how much sugar, spices or lemon peel a recipe calls for, or what mass production abuses it may suffer.

In the 1860s, Merryweather would have been aware of Bramley's culinary merits and recognised its value as a late-season apple that not only stored well (until March) but retained its acidity until spring, making it highly marketable over a long period. Many other late 'cookers', though keeping sound for months, gradually lose their acidity and become flat and insipid when cooked, hence the call for ▶

AGE AND BEAUTY

Resplendent with spring blossom in May last year, this tree grows in a private garden in Southwell, Nottinghamshire. Its head of branches has grown vertically upwards from the main trunk after the tree was blown over in a gale in about 1900

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lemon juice to give some bite. Bramley needed no such help. And being a late keeper it suited modern storage and marketing requirements, which now deliver Bramley nearly every month of the year, almost as sharp as first picked.

Commercial success

'Bramley's Seedling' was fortunate in being in the right place at the right time. Although introduced in the 1860s, it did not make a real public debut until the National Apple Congress of 1883, held by the RHS in its former Chiswick garden. The aim was to bring together as many as possible of the different apples growing throughout Britain in order that the fruit experts could resolve the confusion of names, synonyms and identities. Some 1,500 cultivars were displayed, which proved to be an enormous public attraction.

Visitors were amazed by the diversity of apples available at a time when English fruit in the markets was almost overwhelmed by foreign imports. Having already been highly commended by the Society's Fruit Committee in 1876, 'Bramley's Seedling' received an RHS First Class Certificate, and now its worth as 'a very excellent culinary apple' was consolidated. The first large-scale commercial plantings were made in Kent in 1890, setting it on its way to be a major market and garden apple.

In the battle with imports, Bramley apples found a niche, as no other country

KEEPING THE STORY ALIVE
The fruit almost ready for picking in Church Street, Southwell

produced 'cookers'. Even when, years later, the industry faced competition after the UK's entry into the Common Market in 1975 and growers responded with intensive plantations of trees on semi-dwarfing 'M9' rootstocks (that produced the pristine appearance and consistent size demanded by supermarkets), 'Bramley's Seedling' met the challenge. Commonly believed to succeed only as a standard tree on a vigorous stock, by the early 1980s trials demonstrated it would thrive on any rootstock. It was promoted as thoroughly British along with our most-cherished eating apple, 'Cox's Orange Pippin'. Alas, Cox has diminished in importance but Bramley apples are still planted.

Today 80,000–100,000 tonnes of Bramleys are produced annually: in Kent (39,000 tonnes), the Wisbech area of East Anglia (10,000 tonnes), the West Midlands (6,000 tonnes) and Northern Ireland (35,000 tonnes). About 25 percent of the crop is sold as fresh fruit and 45 percent for processing as pie, crumble fillings and other food products. The remainder goes for juice, and to make cider. Most of Northern Ireland's Bramley apples form a major ingredient of a popular Irish cider.

Not the only cooker

The triumphant journey of 'Bramley's Seedling', however, has swept aside all other cookers. Grown on 'M9' rootstock, Bramley apple will 'size up' early and

fruit can be picked and sold in August. The main crop, harvested in September, can be stored and marketed through to June and July. So, sadly, we have lost the seasonal successions of different culinary apples, their flavours and cooking properties, but thanks to 'Bramley's Seedling' success this British culinary tradition lives on. Anyone wanting to cook a true apple crumble or enjoy a baked apple need only go to the local supermarket, and the enthusiast wishing to sample a wider range of 'cookers' can still track them down at farmers' markets, visit the collections at RHS Garden Wisley, the National Fruit Collections at Brogdale, or better still grow them in their own garden. ■

Joan Morgan is Chairman of the RHS Fruit Trials Sub-Committee and co-author of *The New Book of Apple*

@ A full list of Award of Garden Merit (AGM) apple cultivars and a practical guide to their cultivation is available on RHS Online. Visit: www.rhs.org.uk/plants/documents/agmfruit2008leaflet.pdf

i Hundreds of cultivars are grown and sold at RHS Garden Wisley and the National Fruit Collections at Brogdale, Kent; www.brogdalecollections.co.uk

* At RHS Garden Rosemoor's Apple Day on 11 October 2009 one of 200 'Bramley's Seedling' trees grafted from the original tree will be planted. See www.rhs.org.uk/rhseventfinder.
• See also www.bramleyapples.co.uk

JOAN MORGAN'S OTHER RECOMMENDED 'COOKERS'

Bramley's triumphant success has overshadowed other cooking apples; however, these six cultivars (like 'Bramley's Seedling', all hold the Society's Award of Garden Merit) will provide a succession of fruit for picking and storing throughout the season. When choosing cultivars for planting, pay attention to pollination groups (involving flowering times and incompatibilities between cultivars) to ensure good fruit set. For more information go to: www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profiles1102/choosing_apples



'EMNETH EARLY' (syn. 'EARLY VICTORIA')

Raised by Mr W Lynn of Emneth, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, it was first recorded in 1899. The fruits cook easily, to a mildly sharp fluff. It hardly needs any sugar. Baked it will rise up like a soufflé.

- Season: late July–September.
- Heavy, biennial cropping (every other year); thinning will help control this and improve fruit size. Has some resistance to scab and mildew.



'BLENHEIM ORANGE'

Found as a seedling about 1740, near Blenheim Park, Oxfordshire, this is a dual-purpose (cooking and dessert) apple. Early in its season it can be used for cooking, and later for eating fresh, when it has a nutty taste and crumbly texture.

- Season: culinary from late September; fresh eating October–December.
- Light but regular crops; it is a vigorous cultivar with some mildew resistance.



'KING OF THE PIPPINS'

Known since the 18th century, this is another dual-purpose apple. In France it is known as 'Reine des Reinettes', or queen of the reinettes. When cooked, slices will keep their shape making it suited to Continental dishes such as *tarte aux pommes*. In the past it was also popular for making cider.

- Season: October–December, stores well.
- Produces heavy, regular crops and shows good resistance to disease.



'NEWTON WONDER'

Found in 1870 in Newtown, Derbyshire, this cooker was almost as popular as 'Bramley's Seedling' in the interwar years. It cooks to a juicy-sharp purée, but not nearly as acidic as 'Bramley's Seedling'. Good for use in savoury salads and, late in its season, makes a brisk eating apple.

- Season: from October, stores until March.
- This vigorous cultivar produces heavy but biennial crops; the fruit is prone to bitter pit.



'DUMMELLOR'S SEEDLING'

Raised in Leicestershire in the late 18th century, this apple keeps sound and retains its acidity well until the spring. Also known as 'Wellington', it was the closest rival of 'Bramley's Seedling' in the 19th century. It cooks to a translucent purée, as sharp as 'Bramley's Seedling' but with a rather creamier texture.

- Season: from October, stores until March.
- Produces good, regular crops.



'GOLDEN NOBLE'

Discovered in Norfolk and introduced in 1820, this beautiful, large, yellow apple is brisk and well flavoured, keeping just a little of its form and not as sharp as 'Bramley's Seedling'. Bakes to a creamy texture and needs only a little sugar.

- Season: from late September, stores to December, sometimes longer.
- Produces good, regular crops and has some resistance to scab and mildew.