

A fruit of distinction

Quince are ornamental, as easy to use as cooking apples, delicious when cooked and ideal for small gardens. So why don't more of us grow them?

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For many centuries, a staple of British household life were fruits with an illustrious past, rooted in antiquity and mythology: quinces. That they are rarely seen today is sad, yet understandable – the fruits are too astringent to eat fresh, but are no less versatile than cooking apples.

Quince growing goes back millennia. So many were grown in Crete in ancient times they were dubbed 'Cydonian apples' after the Minoan port of Kydonia (now Chania). Appropriately the Latin name *Cydonia oblonga* commemorates this historic trade. The popularity of the fruit continued



through the Roman period and well beyond (see panel on quince history, p66).

Growing quinces

Quinces are small trees or multi-stemmed shrubs, originally grown around the Mediterranean, the Middle East and in the Balkans. Members of the rose family, they are thought to be native to mountain valleys of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Their aromatic fruit, closely related to pears, are full of vitamin C and pectin.

Though largely inedible fresh, when cooked quinces can be used both in savoury and fruit dishes, or made into jellies, preserves and jams. Once, quinces flavoured beer and wine, and their pervasive sweet aroma freshened rooms and linen.

Today, gardeners and cooks are reappreciating quinces for being both ornamental and productive. Trained, they can be grown as specimen trees, ideal for smaller gardens. They are also good as multi-stemmed shrubs in borders, or as additions to hedgerows and orchards.

Quince cultivars are hardy in most parts of the UK, down to around -20°C (-4°F), although fruiting may not be reliable in northerly or exposed areas. A warm, sunny, sheltered spot helps prevent frost damage to flowers and aids fruit ripening. Or, train against a wall and the extra warmth will improve fruit quality and productivity. Quinces are not too fussy about soil; they do well on moist, well-drained loam, disliking thin, dry, chalky or constantly wet soils.

In May, quince trees are studded with pretty 5cm (2in) diameter blush-pink flowers among newly emerged pale green, felted leaves. Some are self-fertile, but all are popular with bees. The downy fruit, at first insignificant and hidden among the foliage, begin to swell from late summer. Ultimately the branches may bend under rich, golden fruit.

Different quince cultivars vary in habits but all are easily trained. Many plants are grafted onto a named quince rootstock (see p64), so ask about the effect this will have

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Culinary quinces

Numbers in the text refer to the following *Cydonia oblonga* cultivars – not to be confused with Japanese quinces (*Chaenomeles* species).

1 'Krymsk' (syn. 'Aromatnya'): recent cultivar from a Russian research station of the same name. Said to be sweet enough to eat fresh, with a pineapple fragrance.

2 'Vranja' (AGM): large-fruited Serbian cultivar, perhaps a synonym with 'Bereczcki' **9**. Vigorous, introduced into the UK in the 1920s, now widely grown.

3 'Isfahan': fairly new, named for the Iranian city where it originated.

4 'Ludovic': similar to 'Vranja' **2**. Large fruit with soft, yellow flesh.

5 'Lusitanica': often called 'Portugal', long grown in Europe and introduced to Britain in the 17th century. Fruit of good quality, but not as productive as other cultivars. Flesh turns purple when cooked.

6 Iranian quince: introduced by Keepers Nursery in 1994; widely grown in Iran but has no cultivar name. Fine-textured fruit, reputedly sweet enough to eat fresh.

7 'Sobu': vigorous Turkish cultivar. Good crops of large pear-shaped fruit, but some say it lacks flavour.

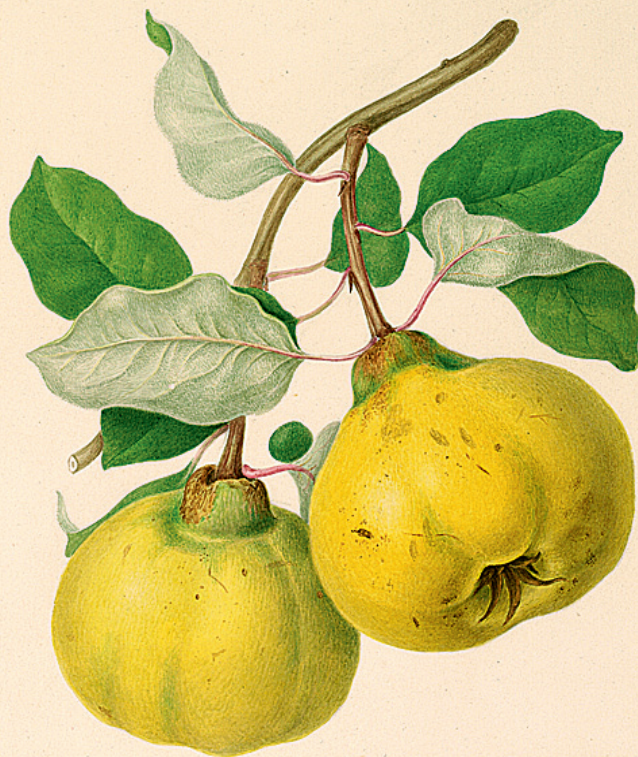
8 'Agvambari': similar to 'Vranja' **2**, large, golden fruit, soft yellow flesh.

9 'Bereczcki': named for a Hungarian pomologist. May be the same as 'Vranja' **2** (the two may be confused in the trade).

10 'Champion': 19th-century American cultivar, late ripening. Large, pear-shaped fruit.

11 'Meech's Prolific': found in Connecticut, USA in the 1850s. Vigorous, makes a fine garden tree. Large, pear-shaped fruit.

❖ Photographed at RHS Garden Wisley, 15 September 2010; 'Sobu' **7** measures approximately 13cm (5in) high.



W. Hooker.
1876.

before you buy. 'Meech's Prolific' **1**, 'Sobu' **7** and 'Vranja' **2** mature into low, wide trees ultimately only 4.5–6m (15–20ft) high. Choose an individual with a clear stem and strong head of branches for a free-standing tree.

Support young trees with a stake if necessary until established. No specific pruning regime is needed – just remove congested growth and crossing branches to shape the canopy and encourage air flow.

Harvesting and storage

Through September and October, maturing quince fruit turn yellow, helpfully emitting their distinctive, fruity aroma. Fully ripe quinces usually detach, but if not cut fruit stalks with secateurs to prevent the fragile fruiting spurs from snapping. Although heavy and hard, quinces bruise easily and quickly decay.

Store fruits dry, not touching, somewhere cool and airy at about 10°C

(50°F). Most will keep for two or three months (late ripeners last longest).

Quinces are perhaps seeing a renaissance, with 16 cultivars currently available in the *RHS Plant Finder* and two National Plant Collections holding more than 20 cultivars each. If more cooks also took them seriously, they may again become a great British staple – and handsome trees for smaller gardens. **●**

SUPPLIERS

- ✦ Agroforestry Research Trust, Devon; 01803 840776; www.agroforestry.co.uk
- ✦ Keepers Nursery, Kent; 01622 726465; www.keepers-nursery.co.uk
- ✦ Reads Nursery, Norfolk; 01986 895555; www.readsnursery.co.uk

NATIONAL PLANT COLLECTIONS

- ✦ Norton Priory Museum & Gardens, Cheshire; 01928 569895; www.nortonpriory.org
- ✦ Mr A Thompson, Bridgnorth; 01746 714332 email: hannigansfarm@btinternet.com

www.rhs.org.uk For quince recipes from Mary Berry, see 'Latest issue' at www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

Quince history

Quinces have long been highly prized. In Greek mythology, the 'golden apple' Paris gave to the goddess Aphrodite (in return for the love of Helen, 'the most beautiful woman in the world' – which sparked the Trojan War) is thought to have been a quince, not an apple.

Quinces arrive in Britain

Although the fruit was popular with the Romans, quinces came to Britain with the Normans. By 1372, Chaucer mentions its use in marmalade, jellies and candied sweetmeats. In 1629, herbalist John Parkinson wrote 'no other fruit has so many uses for meat dishes and sweet courses than quince', and listed six distinct types.

Quinces remained popular through the middle ages and the 18th century. As more appetising soft fruit were developed in the 19th century, they declined (Robert Hogg's great *Fruit Manual* of 1884 listed only three).

Growing to America

In the USA by contrast, and traditional growing areas such as the Balkans and Caucasus, quinces remained popular. New US selections were described in a book in 1888 by the Reverend William Wither Meech. Two of the best, 'Meech's Prolific' **1** and 'Champion' **10**, are still widely grown. Quince culture declined in the USA in the 20th century, partly due to their susceptibility to fireblight disease. Today, South American nations have become major exporters.

The east end

In the 1920s, quinces from the Balkans reached the UK, including 'Bereczcki' **9** and 'Vranja' **2**. In the last decade, cultivars from Turkey, Iran, Serbia and Russia have reached our shores, some said to be sweet enough to eat fresh (so-called Iranian quince), or better-flavoured after ripening, such as 'Krymsk' **1**. Their performance in our typically cooler summers is still under evaluation, but several show promise.