

Bearing fruit

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Increasing demand for British-grown fruit and a renewed interest in heritage varieties is creating something of a renaissance, says **Clare Hargreaves**



Picture autumnal Britain and what comes to mind? For me, it's wonderfully misshapen trees and hedgerows studded with ripe fruit.

There's no question that the terrain and climate make the UK perfect for growing truly flavoursome fruit. Along with lamb, it's the food we do best. 'We don't get the temperature extremes that other countries get. Our maritime climate is ideal,' says Adrian Barlow, CEO of English Apples and Pears.

So it's odd – some would say shocking – that as a nation we grow just 12 per cent of the fruit we eat. Even at the height of the season it can be hard to find British fruit. We've all heard the reasons: British growers are unable to compete with cheap imports because of high labour costs – that's if they can persuade any workers to pick at all. Another is that consumers are spurning traditional British varieties in favour of foreign, sweeter, cosmetically beautiful ones.

The good news is the juggernaut is slowly turning. We're producing and eating more homegrown fruit, and are increasingly unhappy about buying fruit transported from overseas. Supermarket sales figures bear this out. Of the apples sold at

Sainsbury's, for example, 38 per cent are now British grown, compared to just 21 per cent five years ago.

How has it happened? For starters, growers realise they need to be commercial to compete, so are planting densely packed dwarf trees that are productive and easy to pick. The biggest revolution, perhaps, is cherry growing, thanks to the breeding of smaller trees that can be covered to protect fruit from frost, birds and rain.

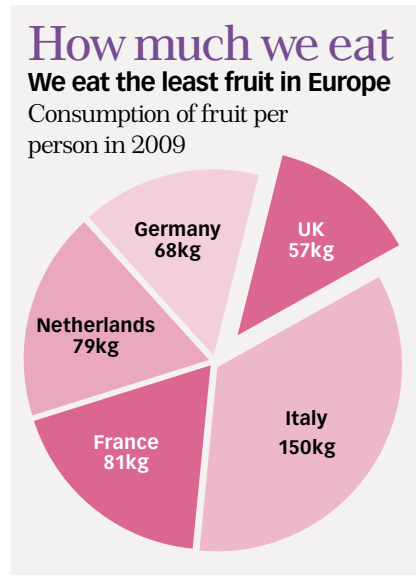
Strawberries are now largely housed inside vast temples of plastic – not pretty perhaps but, some would argue, a small price to pay for the revival of British fruit. About 70 per cent of the strawberries we consume are now UK-grown, compared to 48 per cent in 1998. We're branching into new fruits, too, like blueberries, now Britain's second-most-consumed soft fruit.



To compete with imports, however, British growers are having to adapt the varieties they grow to modern

tastes. In the case of apples, this means blemish-free and sweet. Which means forsaking old British favourites, such as Cox's Orange Pippin. 'The Cox has a complexity many consumers no longer want,' says Barlow. 'The way ahead is likely to be the New Zealand variety, Gala – which has just ousted the Cox as number one – and new varieties such as Jazz and Kanzi.' For cherries, it's fat, juicy, black varieties such as Stella.

Some object that these trends do little to help ancient varieties of fruit and traditional orchards ('traditional' signifies the trees are full-size, not dwarf). Over the past 60 years, we've lost an estimated two-thirds of our traditional orchards, partly due to EU grants in the 70s that encouraged digging them up. A recent survey by the People's Trust for Endangered Species found 35,378 traditional orchards left, covering 16,990 hectares.



Crunch time

The good news
We're eating more British apples. In 2009, 34 per cent of all the apples bought were grown in the UK, up from 24 per cent in 2003.

The bad news
Demand for UK-grown pears is falling, accounting for 17 per cent of total sales in 2009, down from 20 per cent in 2003.

What you can do
How about replacing your morning glass of orange juice with some locally pressed apple?

Conservationists are worried not only about the loss of fruit varieties – Britain has over 2,000 varieties of eating apple – but also about wildlife in the orchards.

Happily, there's a renewed interest in our fruit heritage. Owners of vast orchards, such as the National Trust, are turning their fruits into juice, jam and ice cream. The trust has joined forces with juice-maker Copella to run a campaign to plant and protect English apple trees. The Co-op is selling a 'Tillington 1000 Heritage Apple Juice' made from 1,000 heritage apple trees it rescued in 2008.

BBC chef Raymond Blanc is creating a 20-acre orchard to grow British fruits for his Michelin-starred restaurant, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, near Oxford. The revival in craft cider and perry is also helping save cider apple and perry pear orchards in Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. Small steps, but they do show we're keen to be proud of British fruit again.

Are you finding it easier to buy British fruit? We'd love to hear your views.

Email us at goodfood@bbc.com or write to Media Centre MC3D1, 201 Wood Lane, London W12 7TQ

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