

Pyrus the Pear

Wade Muggleton
Pictures of pears © Wade Muggleton

Apples are a much loved and widely written about part of our contemporary culture and History. There is a huge volume of work published on them with countless books, pomonas, journals and articles about the cultivated apple *Malus domestica*. Yet the Pear in all its forms is a far less well known member of the Rosaceae family. Works on pears are thin on the ground and there is a huge gulf in knowledge when it come to many things pear related.

Pears belong to the genus *Pyrus*, a wide ranging and diverse genus found across the world. The genus is thought to have originated in present-day Western China in the foothills of the Tian Shan, a mountain range of Central Asia, where the forebears of the cultivated apple also originated. They probably spread west via the trade routes and migrations of early civilisations, evolving into a diverse group of over 20 widely recognised species. The enormous number of varieties of the cultivated European pear *Pyrus communis* subsp. *communis* are without doubt derived from one or two wild subspecies *P. communis* subsp. *pyraster* and *P. communis* subsp. *caucasica*, both widely distributed throughout Europe, and sometimes forming part of the natural vegetation of native forests, the wild or hedge pears found randomly in the countryside.

Pear cultivation in cool temperate climates extends way back in human history with evidence of the use as a food appearing in the archaeological record in excavations of settlements from a diverse range of periods.

The word “pear”, or its equivalent, occurs in all the Celtic languages, and we know they were cultivated by the Romans, who ate the fruits raw or cooked. Pliny's *Natural History* recommended stewing them with honey and noted three dozen varieties. So perhaps today the eating of pears has fallen to an almost historic low.

Pears have been cultivated in China for approximately 3000 years. Asian species with medium to large edible fruit include *P. pyrifolia*, *P. ussuriensis*, *P. × bretschneideri*, *P. × sinkiangensis*, and *P. pashia*. Other small-fruited species are frequently used as rootstocks for the cultivated forms. These Asian or ‘Nashi’ pears can be grown here in the UK and at least physically often resemble an apple more than a pear.

About 3000 known varieties of pears are grown worldwide, although the average supermarket may stock on two or three types, so like apples there are countless varieties, few of which ever make it into the shops. The pear is normally propagated by grafting a selected variety onto a rootstock, which may be of a pear (*pyrus*) or quince (*cydonia*). Quince rootstocks produce smaller trees, which is often desirable in commercial orchards or gardens although for longevity and stability *Pyrus* rootstocks are superior (in the author’s view).

Pear wood is close-grained and in the past was used as a specialised timber for fine furniture and making blocks for woodcuts. The production of pear timber may have given rise to the misconstrued saying “*Plant pears for your heirs*”. Some have taken this to infer that you will wait a long time to see any fruit when planting a young pear tree, when the saying may well have related to the timber in that by planting pear trees you are leaving your heirs something of value way into the future. Many varieties will fruit well within 4-5 years so seemingly proving the saying does not relate to their fruiting characteristics.

Whilst almost all pears in the supermarkets are dessert fruit for eating fresh, cultivated pears fall into several groups. The inedible **Perry pears**, very high in tannins and only good for juicing and fermenting into Perry, a historic drink that has undergone something of resurgence of late.

The **Harvest pears** which, like early eating apples, can be picked and consumed straight from the tree as they do not possess any keeping characteristics. Presumably named because their ripening coincided with harvest time when they were eaten out in the fields by farm workers.

There are also the much overlooked culinary or cooking pears referred to as **Warden Pears** for they are a group of usually large pears that never truly ripen to a point where they can be eaten fresh so are only usable for baking and stewing. They also tend to possess good keeping qualities and can be stored through the winter. The most famous example locally being The Worcester Black Pear subject of my new book (below).

Then there are the **dessert pears**, the largest group in terms of sheer number of varieties, which are picked green and then stored until ripe. Kept at low temperatures ripening is delayed, and they can then be bought to room temperature when the ripening accelerates over a few days. There is an old joke that there are only 10 minutes in the life of a pear when it is truly ripe and the skill lies in judging when those 10 minutes are.

Fruit identification is now moving into the World of DNA where leaf samples can be analysed for the genetic structure of a sample tree that is then cross referenced against the Nation Fruit collection’s DNA data base. This is of limited use in the identification of pears for whilst the national collection at Brogdale have just over 500 varieties there are lists of well over 1500 in some old catalogues so many submitted samples simply come back as DNA no known match, and as historic references are limited and there is little description of varieties to enable a sample today to be linked with a historic name. I have just this year come across several interesting pears on very old trees and the chance of ever being able to work out what historically they were is extremely low. It is still worth DNA-ing them so the profile is recorded should any future sample ever match it and reveal some further clues. But sadly much of the Pear story is likely forever lost as there is simply not enough information to go on. Yes, there are a number of interesting old pears still hanging on in forgotten orchards and over-grown corners of the county but in terms of formal identification and ever being able to name them as historic varieties I fear that might be a step too far. They should still be propagated and cultivated as pieces of our history and as a genetic pool, but we have to give them new working names to reflect the shortfall in historic knowledge.

Here are some photographs of a range of unidentified pears that have been bought to my attention but that we have been unable to identify as there are so few people who know pears and so little reference material with which to work (01-07)

Working with The Worcestershire Wildlife Trust we are establishing a collection of the surviving Warden variety pears on land near Pershore, slowly collecting known varieties and planting two of each in a collection orchard.

NEW BOOK (08).

The Worcester Black Pear by Wade Muggleton

Living in Worcestershire it is very hard to escape the image of the pear, it crops up all over the place from the cricket club badge to the County coat of arms. So just why is Worcester so synonymous with the pear, and what is its place in History? Here documented is a story of real intrigue as for the first time the Worcester Black Pear has been the subject of considerable research and scrutiny and as result much of the information in the book has never before been published.

Priced £8 with all profits to the Vale Landscape heritage Trust. available from www.marcherapple.net/shop or from the countryside centre at Worcester or contact wmuggleton@worcestershire.gov.uk

The Worcester Black Pear



Wade Muggleton
with recipes by
Clare Tibbits

08. Worcester Black Pear - the book



02. Jennett Pear - pears from a very old tree growing in Callow End.



03. Kinlet Pear - pears from an old tree growing in Kinlet just north of Wyre Forest.



01. Hedge Pear - a wild or random pear presumably some sort of *Pyrus pyraster* that has grown from a pip.



04. Newland Pears - two samples from huge old trees growing at Newland near Malvern



05. Talgarth Pears - some as yet unidentified samples from an old tree at Talgarth in Powys



06. Unknown Nashi - some sort of Asian pear bought to an Apple Day event in 2017. We had never seen the like of before or since.



07. Worcester Silk - A pear growing in Ombersley that is anecdotally known as Worcester Silk. There are no references in literature to that name yet three different sources claim there was a local variety known by that name.

Images

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