

Heirloom Pears

Pears have a long history of cultivation—grow a piece of the past on your farm with heirloom pear trees.

By Sue Weaver

© Barbara Bearst Adams Ready to grow your own pear trees? Pick up a copy of Popular Farming Series: Orcharding online or in farm store near you. [More About Pears](#)

Hardy, adaptable heirloom pears are best bets for hobby-farm orchards in the regions where modern pears grow.

However, keep these things in mind: Most European pear trees, new and old alike, are hardy to 25 degrees F below zero and require 800 to 1,000 hours of chilling below 45 degrees F; they thrive in zones 4 through 9.

Pears bloom one to three weeks earlier than apple trees; late spring frosts can damage buds and flowers.

Most pears are self-sterile and need another variety planted within 40 feet to cross-pollinate, so don't plan to grow just one pear tree.

Many pears are extremely susceptible to fire blight, a serious bacterial disease that destroys blossoms, shoots, limbs, rootstock and even entire trees. Find more information [here](#)>> To avoid it, choose cultivars with known resistance.

The Basics:

Pears grow best in deep, well-draining loam with a pH between 6 and 7, but they adapt to heavy soils better than most fruit trees. Avoid waterlogged locations and plant in full sunlight whenever you can.

Space standard trees 25 feet apart; plant trees grafted on quince roots at 15-foot intervals. Dig a hole deep and wide enough to spread the roots without crowding.

Install hardware cloth or plastic tubes around the trunks of younger trees to discourage predation by rabbits and bury it 2 inches into the ground to discourage voles.

Learn to judiciously prune young pear trees. Ask your county extension agent to show you how.

When your trees begin to bear, practice early summer thinning to produce larger fruit and to prevent branches from breaking.

Leave one pear per cluster. Pick European pears when they're firm-mature; don't let them ripen on the tree. Tree-ripened pears mature from the inside out and get mushy before the outside is "done." Plus, the full flavor of pears develops through ripening off the tree.

As pears mature, they're easy to detach from the tree. Pick them when they snap off the tree when twisted upward. If you have to tug to pick a pear, it's probably not ready to harvest; if it falls off the tree, it's over mature.

Store pears in a refrigerator or cold cellar at just above freezing. To ripen for eating, allow them to sit at room temperature for several days. Check by pressing the stem end of a likely pear. When it yields readily, take a big bite and enjoy!?

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Picture this: It's a blustery day in late October; outside the world is wet and dreary gray. You walk to the kitchen counter where you're ripening pears. Will you choose a sweet, juicy, homegrown Clapp's Favorite or a buttery-smooth White Doyenné?

You press each pear's stem end and the white Doyenné yields to pressure just so. You close your eyes and bite into its luscious flesh; a stream of juice dribbles down your chin. Ahhhh.

Aren't you glad you grow heirloom pears?

Even if you don't grow heirloom pears, you've almost certainly eaten some. Unlike apples, which nowadays are mostly upstart 20th-century clones, the familiar faces in the pear bins at your favorite supermarket are very likely heirlooms.

Bosc? Anjou? Comice? Bartlett? Seckle? If you've tasted them, you've eaten heirloom pears. Beautiful, buttery, brown-russeted Beurré Bosc (Bosc) originated in Belgium in 1807; Beurré d'Anjou (Anjou) followed in 1819; and Doyenné du Comice (Comice) is French, circa 1848. Bartlett, an English pear, has been cultivated since 1765; and Seckel, that tiny, all-American morsel of succulent goodness, oldest of all, was discovered in 1759.

Still, there are hundreds, maybe thousands, more tantalizing vintage pears still grown around the globe, many of them as close as the garden nurseries listed in "Get Your Hands on Heirloom Pears."

Heirloom dessert pears, cooking pears, perry pears and crunchy, vintage Asian pears—they're out there, waiting for you.

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In the Beginning

According to Nicolai Vavilov, a renowned Russian botanist who identified the centers of origin of hundreds of cultivated plants, *Pyrus communis*, the European pear, originated in southwest Asia, where it was grown some 4,000 years ago. It was cultivated in Europe by 1000 B.C.

The ancient Greeks adored the pear, a fruit the poet Homer (850 B.C.) called "a gift from the gods."

Aristotle's successor, Theophrastus, discussed Greek pear culture circa 300 B.C.

The pear was sacred to two Greek goddesses, Hera and Aphrodite; according to Pausanias, writing in the second century A.D., one of the oldest statues of Hera was carved of wild-pear wood.

When Roman author Pliny the Elder penned *Natural History* about 79 A.D., he described 41 varieties of pear; Pliny also claimed that pears were harmful eaten raw, but were good when boiled with honey.

Bigger, tastier pears traveled to the far-flung corners of the Roman Empire, where they flourished as far north as Great Britain and Gaul (better known as France).

Time passed and pear connoisseurs developed more and more cultivars.

In 1597, British herbalist John Gerard claimed a friend grew 60 varieties of dessert pears and 60 perry and livestock-feed cultivars in his English orchard.

In Tuscany, Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici (1590-1621) charmed dinner guests with 209 varieties of table pears. Pears arrived in America on two fronts. The Massachusetts Company provided the new American Colonies with seeds in 1629.

Later, pears rounded Cape Horn with Franciscan padres who established a chain of 21 missions in California between 1769 and 1823; a tree at Mission San Juan Batista that was planted in 1810 is still bearing fruit.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, French and Belgian horticulturists developed many of the scrumptious dessert pears we love today.

Thomas Jefferson, acting as America's foreign minister to France, fell so in love with delicious French pears that he

planted 17 varieties at his Virginia plantation, Monticello.

Dr. Jean-Baptiste Van Mons (1765-1842), a Belgian pharmacist and physician, developed 40 new dessert cultivars, including Bosc and (some say) Anjou pears.

In 1831, at the height of the Western world's love affair with pears, the British Royal Horticultural Society grew 627 distinct varieties in their gardens. Where did they go? Therein lies a tale.

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Not All Pears Are Bartletts

When most of us think of a pear, we visualize the clear skin and sinuous lines of a Bartlett. Discovered as seedlings growing wild in Berkshire, England, it was distributed as Williams Bon Chrétien.

Get Your Hands on Heirloom Pears

Cummins Nursery
www.cumminsnursery.com
607-227-6147

Fedco Seeds
www.fedcoseeds.com
207-873-7333

Greenmantle Nursery
www.greenmantlenursery.com
707-986-7504

Jung Quality Seeds
www.jungseed.com
800-297-3123

Henry Leuthardt Nurseries, Inc.
www.henryleuthardtnurseries.com
631-878-1387

One Green World
www.onegreenworld.com
877-353-4028

Raintree Nursery
www.raintreenursery.com
360-496-6400

Southmeadow Fruit Gardens
www.southmeadowfruitgardens.com
269-422-2411

Trees of Antiquity
www.treesofantiquity.com
805-467-9909

Vintage Virginia Apples
<http://vintagevirginiaapples.com>
434-297-2326

Perry

Old Scrump's Cider House

Everything you need to know about perry pears and making them into fine-tasting perry

Other

The Pears of New York (full text online), by U.P. Hedrick (New York Agricultural Experiment Station; 1921)

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Thomas Brewer of Roxbury, Mass., imported it in 1799. The Brewer property passed to Enoch Bartlett in 1817 and, not knowing the tree's true identity, he renamed the pear and distributed it as Bartlett. To this day it's known as Bartlett in North America and as Williams Bon Chrétien (or simply Williams) to the rest of the world.

Bartlett is the world's most popular pear, for many good reasons: It's big and delicious, it holds for months in cold storage, it ships well, and it's beautiful to behold. Not so with most other old pears.

Consider the Madeleine, cultivated as the Citron des Carmes in France as early as 1628. Compared to modern pears, it's tiny, subject to core breakdown if left on the tree too long and it's far too tender to ship. But oh, the flavor! Its fine-grained flesh is sweet, rich and ultra-juicy.

Named by the Carmelite monks who first grew this luscious fruit, it's at its succulent best at the Feast of St. Madeleine in France and mid- to late July in North America.

At the other end of the scale is a late-season monster: the Pound pear.

Also known as Belle Angevine and Uvedale's St. Germaine, it originated sometime prior to 1690 and may date to Roman days. This pear is enormous!

Most weigh two or more pounds and gigantic four-pound pears are fairly common. In olde England, Pound pears were baked whole, wrapped in pastry crusts. The keyword is baked; these tough, coarse pears aren't meant to be eaten out of hand. However, cooking makes their firm, red flesh yummy and smooth. Pound pears keep in storage until spring, making them top-of-the-line winter fare.

Have you ever sampled a Madeleine or sliced into a fine, baked Pound? Probably not—but you could. Cummins Nursery (see "Get Your Hands on Heirloom Pears," opposite) carries both of these Old World heritage trees. Or perhaps you'd prefer American heirlooms? Two that spring to mind are Seckel and Tyson.

Around 1760, the original Seckel tree was discovered growing wild on the outskirts of Pennsylvania by Dutch Jacobs, a well-known sportsman and cattle dealer, who distributed its spicy, wee fruits to his friends, but kept its location secret for many years. Later a man named Seckel bought the land and named the tree after himself.

Of this sweet, aromatic, spicy fruit, horticulturist W. Coxe wrote in 1817, "[it is] the finest pear of this or any country." Thomas Jefferson concurred; though he grew French pears in his fruitery at Monticello, he said of Seckel, "they exceed anything I have tasted since I left France."

Tyson won the same rave reviews. Discovered growing in a hedgerow in 1794 on land belonging to Jonathan Tyson of Jenkintown, Pa., it became a major pear cultivar in its day.

U.P. Hedrick, who wrote *The Pears of New York*, the quintessential book on pears, wrote in 1921 that "Tyson is the best pear of its season for the home orchard" and "No other variety offers so many good starting points for the pear-breeder."

Though not as large or pretty as its rival, Bartlett, Tyson pears are extra-juicy, sweet and aromatic—and they grow on ultra-hardy trees.

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Meanwhile, Back in the Orient

No discussion of heirloom pears is complete without mentioning luscious Asian pears. At the same time the ancient Greeks were cultivating new and exciting varieties of European pears, the Chinese and Japanese were perfecting their own delectable cultivars of *Pyrus pyrifolia*: the crisp and juicy Asian pear.

The Asian pear, known as “li” in China and “nashi” in Japan, originated in China about 4,000 years ago. Cultivated varieties were mentioned in Chinese writings dating to 1134 B.C. From China they spread to Japan, Korea and Taiwan, and finally to our West Coast along with Asian immigrants coming to America.

The sweet-tart, apple-shaped Okusankichi pear (also called Nihon Nashi) is an heirloom dating to the 1890s. Now obsolete in Japan, it’s one of the oldest varieties still cultivated in California. Another from the same era, the ultra-aromatic Chojuro, is readily available from nurseries that sell Asian pear trees.

If you’ve ever celebrated Chinese New Year in a Chinese community, you’ve probably sampled China’s favorite ancient fruit. The two li cultivars sold in North America and served at traditional Chinese New Year festivities (Ya Li and Tsu Li) are at least 1,000 years old. More pear- than apple-shaped, li are not as juicy as nashi pears, but they’re crisp and very tasty all the same.

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And Then There’s Perry

If you’ve ever sampled traditional cider—curl-your-toes, real, hard cider, not sweet, apple juice; think cider made with pears—you’ve had perry.

Perry, once consumed by the barrellful in England, France, and parts of Switzerland and Austria, is staging a dramatic comeback thanks in part to Three Counties Perry, a Slow Food presidium made up of perry producers in the West Midlands region of England.

As artisan perry becomes more readily available in North America (and it is), legions of Americans are climbing aboard the perry bandwagon. If you’re looking for a farm-based business, maybe you should make heritage perry, too.

Pliny the Elder was the first of the ancients to write about alcoholic beverages made from pears; he recommended Falernian pears for making tasty wine. Palladius, another Roman writing in the fourth century A.D., left instructions for making fermented pear juice into perry called Castomoniale.

Perry was a first-rate drink in France, where growing conditions make pears the prince of fruits. Charlemagne loved it and perry was Napoleon’s favorite beverage, but perry didn’t cross the channel into England until the time of the Norman Conquest.

The Warden pear, popular during the reign of Henry the VIII (1509-1547), was used to make perry and as a preservative; those who drank Warden perry praised its “austere” flavor.

In 1597, herbalist John Gerard glorified the popular drink, saying, “Wine made of the juice of Peares, called in English Perry, is soluble, purgeth those that are not accustomed to drink thereof; notwithstanding it is as wholesome a drinke being taken in small quantities as wine; it comforteth and warmeth the stomacke, and causeth a good digestion.”

Botanist John Parkinson, a contemporary of Gerard wrote that, “Perry made of Choke Pears, notwithstanding the harshness and evill taste, both of the fruit and juice, after a few months, becomes as milde and pleasante as wine.”

Harsh? Evil? Yes, indeed. Perry pears are not for casual munching, although some were eaten and used for cooking in days gone by. Small, hard and packed with tannins, they were bred for centuries for one reason only: to make the world’s best-tasting perry.

Ancient perry pear trees were long-lived and immense; so long-lived, in fact, that many are still alive today. Some are as many as 300 years old and still bear fruit. And they’re huge—immense—sometimes 80 feet tall and 8 feet or more in trunk circumference. Picture an ancient oak tree that grows pears: Those are the surviving perry trees of England’s West Midlands.

Yet, you can plant some of the ancient varieties in your own backyard if you’d like to make perry at home. Botanist John Worlidge, writing in 1691, praised Bosbery and Bareland pears as perry making’s best of the best.

Bareland, now called Barland, is listed on Dr. Robert Hogg’s list of best perry pears (penned in 1884) and is available from three American nurseries. However, Barland pears, much planted in Herefordshire and the surrounding counties, were described by English gentleman botanist John Evelyn (1620-1706) as, “of such insufferable taste, that hungry swine will

not smell to it, or if hunger tempts them to taste, they shake it out of their mouths.”

So if you grow it, don't sample it raw!

Another cultivar, Hendre Huffcap—long grown in the Haresfield and Bromsberrow districts of Gloucester—makes perry so strong it can lift one's cap; it's available from American nurseries.

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Pear It Is

These are just the tiniest fraction of the hundreds of varieties of heritage pears available to hobby-farm growers. Why settle for supermarket fruit when these cultivars need conservators to preserve them for future generations?

Many historic varieties are available from American garden nurseries with just this thought in mind (Southmeadow Fruit Gardens alone carries 28 cultivars of historic European Pears; Cummins Nursery offers 17 perry pears).

If you're an experienced orchardist, researchers at the National Clonal Germplasm Repository in Corvallis, Ore., are willing to provide scionwood from the 979 types and varieties of pears in their pear collection to growers willing to chronicle and share their experiences growing heritage trees.

So think pears. Heritage pears.

Once you've sunk your teeth into a Rousselet de Reims, favorite fruit of Louis XIV, or sampled perry made with Red Pears, a variety beloved by British perry drinkers since 1500, you'll never turn back. And why should you? Heritage pears are simply the best!

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