

Roy Lancaster favours rare and beautiful trees, and he finds himself spoilt for choice at this Devon nursery

Thornhayes Nursery

SITUATED in a pretty part of rural east Devon, Thornhayes Nursery specialises in ornamental and fruit trees. Here, beautiful and unusual plants abound with ranks of well-grown, open-ground specimens representing an exciting diversity of species and cultivars. There are trees in containers, too, such as magnolias, limes, crab apples and maples, but it is those outside, thriving in the heavy loam soil, that reminded me of the times when most, if not all, nursery trees were raised in this way. About half of all the stock at Thornhayes is open ground, budded or grafted and grown on a rotation system, with each field growing trees for three years then grass for four years.

The nursery was started by Kevin Croucher and his wife Pat in 1991. Kevin began his career by studying at Askham Bryan College in 1976, then lectured for nine years in garden and landscape design, nursery practice and arboriculture at Bicton College, while Pat, who has a degree in biology, organises the nursery's financial matters and its advertising.

Thorny issues

I am a lifelong fan of *Crataegus* (ornamental thorn) species, some of which can hold their own with more popular small trees such as cherries and crab apples. Thornhayes offers *C. x durobrivensis*, *C. ellwangeriana* and *C. x grignonensis*, all are noted for their large red fruits and are well worth growing for their white flower clusters too. Plants are grown in the open ground or containers, and you will not find any trees more suited to the UK climate nor more tolerant of difficult soils. Other thorns on offer include *C. laciniata* (Oriental thorn) with grey, deeply cut leaves, creamy flowers and big red fruits, while *C. schraderiana* is just as exciting and ornamental, but has large, dark purple fruits.

Crataegus phaenopyrum (Washington thorn) is easily distinguished from all others by its glossy, maple-like leaves that colour well to orange-red in autumn and its freely produced, small, dark crimson fruits.

A thorn I had not come across before is 'Big Golden Star', a cultivar of another favourite tree of mine – Chinese *C. pinnatifida* var. *major*. A virtually thornless, round-headed tree, it has large, lobed and toothed leaves, rich autumn colour and white flowers in May–June. These are replaced by yellow fruits said to be more than 3cm (1¼in) in diameter and edible, which often last into winter before decaying.

I saw *x Crataemespilus grandiflora*, a natural hybrid between *Mespilus germanica* (medlar) and *Crataegus monogyna* (common hawthorn), which originated in the wild in France about 200 years ago and is, in my opinion, one of the most handsome small trees for the garden, especially as a lawn specimen. With an average height and spread of 7.6m (25ft); a compact, rounded crown; thornless shoots; glossy green, hairy leaves that turn orange and yellow in autumn; large white flowers from May into June; plus the brownish-orange, sterile fruits, this tree is one of my favourite all-rounders.

These are among the best thorns for ornamental planting, despite a general antipathy towards these trees – a result, in my opinion, of the overplanting of common hawthorn, especially its pink and red cultivars, in suburban streets in the past.

Problem-free crab apples

The same could also be said for crab apples, some of which have suffered a decline in public favour as a result of diseases such as scab, blossom end wilt and fireblight. In my experience, however, there are crabs that rarely suffer these problems, among which I would place *Malus florentina*, *M. transitoria* and *M. hupehensis*. The first two I intend writing about next month, leaving the wonderful *M. hupehensis*.

Taking hardiness, ease of cultivation, freedom of flowering and fruiting into account, *M. hupehensis* is hard to beat. A free-growing tree ultimately to 10m (33ft), it develops a strong crown of ascending branches and gradually opens out to a more spreading habit. In May and June these are crowded with pink-budded white flowers that are fragrant, creating an eye-catching cloud of blossom. The fruits that follow are quite small – pea sized – maturing deep shiny red, strung on slender stalks in clusters that hang like tiny baubles, remaining after leaf fall into winter when they are picked off by hungry birds.

These three crab apples are offered by the nursery along with *M. x robusta* 'Red Sentinel' – one of the most reliable crabs for its long-lasting, red winter fruits. ▷

1 *Euonymus europaeus* 'Thornhayes' was raised by Kevin Croucher in 1991 from a seedling of *E. europaeus* 'Red Cascade'. It is a fine fruiting shrub with a weeping habit, crimson foliage and pink fruits

2 *Betula papyrifera* 'Saint George' combines golden autumn foliage with attractive bark. It is a strong-growing birch of excellent habit, ideal alone or in windbreaks

3 The foliage of columnar *Acer campestre* 'William Caldwell' changes from yellow to orange and red, a notable improvement on the species

4 *Malus hupehensis* bears shiny red, long-lasting, pea-sized fruits that are eventually enjoyed by birds

5 *Chaenomeles cathayensis* var. *wilsonii*: the huge green fruits, the size of apples, are borne on viciously spined branches

6 Ripening through red to pinky-white, the berries of *Sorbus* 'Pearly King' are an attractive feature in autumn

7 *Prunus x verecunda* 'Autumn Glory', a form of Korean hill cherry, has particularly fine autumn colour

8 One of the many ornamental thorns sold by Thornhayes Nursery, *Crataegus schraderiana* has grey, deeply cut leaves and large, shiny purple fruits



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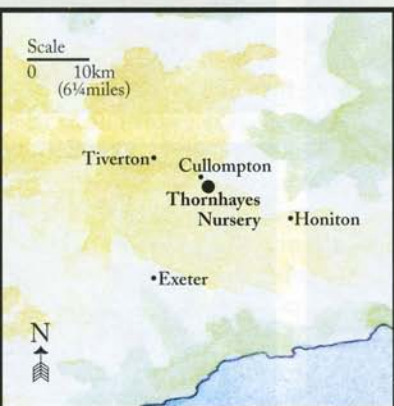


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Kevin and Pat Croucher (above) specialise in unusual apples. They stock more than 200 cultivars including cider apples (below right, from top) 'Spotted Dick' (large yellowish, spotted), 'Harry Master's Jersey' (large green and red), 'Crimson King' (medium red), 'Improved Lambrook Pippin' (large yellow and red) and 'Black Dabinett' (large purple)



Regional fruit:

At Thornhayes Nursery we have gained a name for our wide range of traditional fruit-tree cultivars, particularly apples. In the last 10–12 years interest in fruit growing and the conservation of orchards has increased, generating a market of people and organisations wishing to buy specific trees. This increase in interest has made people more aware of the great wealth of traditional local or regional cultivars in Britain generally, and particularly in the southwest of England.

Working in partnership with various keen and

knowledgeable amateurs and organisations we have rescued many cultivars from oblivion, saving a wealth of genetic material.

As organic gardening methods are becoming increasingly popular, the inherent health and resistance to disease of many traditional West Country apple cultivars offers a valuable basis for future research into breeding new disease-resistant cultivars.

Many commercial apple cultivars perform poorly in the South West's variable soils and diverse climate. Unpredictable seasons, varying rainfall and strong winds lead to a high incidence of fungal

diseases. However, there are local cultivars that prosper and can prove useful to people across Britain, who wish to grow healthy, disease-free fruit without resorting to chemicals. These trees have been bred on generations of hard work and neglect – the traditional farm orchard was not cosseted – those that didn't perform simply didn't survive.



I also noted *Prunus x verecunda* 'Autumn Glory', a form of the Korean hill cherry selected by Captain Collingwood 'Cherry' Ingram in 1929. I first saw this tree in the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum, Hampshire in the 1960s and admired its crowded, single white blossom contrasting with bronze young foliage. In autumn, the leaves change from green to a mixture of red and deep crimson.

Sorbus specialists

Thornhayes grows some 40 or so different *Sorbus* including rarities, such as the white-fruited *S. foliolosa* from the Himalaya and *S. wardii*, a Kingdon Ward introduction from southeastern Tibet and Bhutan. The last named is still one of the best-kept secrets in the tree world, only now becoming more widely available. Its compact, columnar, later ovoid habit; rounded, grey, strongly ribbed foliage; white flowers; and brown speckled golden fruits render this species instantly recognised and no serious tree enthusiast should be without it. Its eventual size of 9m (30ft) and comparatively erect crown make it suitable for all but the smallest spaces.

Sorbus vilmorinii is also offered. This is still the best species if you are looking for small size (it has a height and spread of 5m/16ft), elegant habit, dainty ferny leaves and red fruits ripening to pinky-white. If you have the space, *S.* 'Pearly King' is worth considering. Slightly larger in all its parts, this often masquerades as *S. vilmorinii* in many gardens and nurseries.

Traditional skills

Trees are propagated here from seed and cuttings and by budding and grafting – all the traditional skills on display. I was delighted also to see another technique, French layering, being employed (see Bending the rules, *The Garden*, Feb 1999, pp92–4). This involves stooling certain trees or shrubs to encourage an annual crop of strong shoots. As the buds start to break the next spring, the flexible stems are laid on the ground and secured by means of strong, U-shaped wires. The pinned-down stems are then covered with soil or spent compost which encourages them to produce roots and shoots at each node. Each laid stem can produce several erect shoots which, after leaf fall, are severed into individual plants and grown on.

Not all trees respond to this treatment, of course, but Thornhayes finds it extremely successful with species of *Pterocarya* (wing nuts). These large, deciduous trees are grown for their handsome, ash-like foliage and pendulous tassels of green-winged fruit. I saw stools of *P. fraxinifolia*, *P. stenoptera* and the hybrid between them *P. x rehderiana*. All three are vigorous growers

and by using the French layering technique a saleable plant of 1.2–2.2m (4–7ft) can be produced in just two years. It would take three to four years to achieve a similar-sized plant from a cutting rooted under mist.

Ashburner introductions

Ornamental birch are another speciality here and among the many kinds available I was particularly struck by two that were new to me. A selection made by birch aficionado Kenneth Ashburner of a Japanese species *Betula ermanii*, 'Hakkoda Orange' is a strong-growing, good-looking tree which has orange bark brighter than that of the better-known *B. albosinensis* (Chinese red birch). *Betula papyrifera* 'Saint George', meanwhile, is an outstanding canoe birch. Another Ashburner introduction, this has young red stems similar to those of *Prunus serrula*, later peeling to produce red and white banding and finally white. Its autumn foliage is a rich gold.

Also worth growing for its autumn colour is *Acer campestre* 'William Caldwell', a fastigate form of our native field maple, found as a seedling in 1976 by Donovan Caldwell Leaman, then of Caldwell and Sons, nurserymen of Knutsford in Cheshire. Not only does this tree possess a columnar form but its foliage in autumn changes from the typical yellow to orange and red. Kevin has a 6-m (20-ft) tall tree in his garden only 10 years old and plenty of young, grafted field-grown and container stock.

Kevin raised *Euonymus europaeus* 'Thornhayes', an outstanding fruiting shrub, in 1991 as a seedling from well-known *E. europaeus* 'Red Cascade'. The original seedling in the Crouchers' garden is now 2.5 x 3m (8 x 10ft). Its habit is broadly arching and weeping, perhaps more so than in 'Red Cascade', while its foliage in autumn turns from green to a dark bronze and finally red. The fruits are bright pink and freely borne.

At present the nursery covers 5.3ha (13 acres), a sizeable portion of which is given over to the growing of fruit including apricots, cherries, pears and plums, as well as rarities such as *Chaenomoles cathayensis* var. *wilsonii*, a quince bearing enormous fruit, as much as 13–15cm (5–6in) across. The Crouchers' great love, however, is old apple cultivars, especially those of English origin. More than 200 cultivars are described in the current catalogue, and I can confirm that these are matched by quality stock in the open ground.

For one nurseryman to gather together such a heritage collection and make it available to gardeners deserves recognition beyond mere words. 🍏

Roy Lancaster VMH, plantsman, lecturer, writer and broadcaster, is a member of RHS Floral Committee B



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