



# THE NURTURE OF NATURE

AT THORNHAYES NURSERY NEAR CULLOMPTON, EAST DEVON, TOM GARD MEETS KEVIN CROUCHER,

A NURSERYMAN WITH A PASSION FOR ORNAMENTAL AND FRUIT TREES. PHOTOGRAPHS BY GAVIN KINGCOME





**FROM LEFT: LARCH ROOTSTOCK. KEVIN CROUCHER. TREES FOR COLLECTION. TRAYS OF BENCH-GRAFTED TREES. OPPOSITE, CLOCK-WISE FROM LEFT: PRUNUS 'KURSAR'. TREES BEING LIFTED TO ORDER. APPLE TREES. ANDY SIDEBOTTOM AT WORK.**

One look at Kevin Croucher is enough to convince you that this is not a man cut out for an office job. He is a bear of a man, with hands to match, and the sort of ruddy yeoman's complexion you don't get from behind a desk. However, it was on the office floor at his Thornhayes Nursery, near Cullompton, east Devon, that the previous day Kevin had sought a couple of minutes' refuge, away from the incessant ringing of the phone and the never-ending stream of paper spewing from the fax machine.

Those sort of days are the inevitable by-product of success. From a starting point of two blank silage fields just 12 years ago, Thornhayes now boasts probably the largest selection of ornamental and fruit trees in the UK. It is entirely the result of Kevin's unforgiving pursuit of excellence and his deep-seated love of trees.

Kevin quite enjoys the fact that it has been said of him that 'he loves trees and dogs more than people', and you certainly get the impression he doesn't suffer fools gladly. If, on the other hand, you show an interest in his trees and are able to take advice then he is perfectly prepared to share his encyclopedic knowledge with you. "I'll happily deal with the old lady who wants just one tree, or the Queen," he says, referring to an order from the Lord Lieutenant of Devon to supply a selection of old Devon apple varieties to Sandringham for the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations.

Kevin's background is reassuringly solid: three years at Askham Bryan College of Agriculture and Horticulture in York were followed by another three with local authorities supervising, among other things, large planting schemes and Tree Preservation Orders. Finally, Kevin took up a teaching post at Bicton College of Agriculture, near Budleigh Salterton, where

he specialised in arboriculture and landscape design.

Kevin had ambitions to set up a nursery since he married Pat in the early eighties; Pat is a technical editor by trade but shares her husband's passion for trees. By 1991, Kevin found he'd had enough of teaching and decided to sell up and buy 13 acres just outside the small village of Dulford. Although there's now a spanking new house on the nursery, complete with gardens and show orchard, the Crouchers spent the first six years of their entrepreneurial lives living in a glorified 12 x 6 metre shed. This relative hardship might have driven some back to the safety of a day job, but you get the impression Kevin never even considered he might have made a mistake. While Pat worked to keep them solvent, Kevin steadily grew the business, building up a reputation for supplying top-quality, unusual trees.

Initially, ornamentals were to be the core of the nursery's business, but the Crouchers' venture coincided with a revival of interest in old West Country fruit varieties and traditional orchards, partly fuelled by conservation initiatives and partly by the growing legions of outsiders buying up old farms in search of the rural idyll. Soon Kevin's skills were much in demand – identifying, grafting and propagating new stocks of old trees, some of them on the brink of extinction, uncovered in long neglected orchards. Fruit now accounts for 50 per cent of the trees grown at Thornhayes.

There are some wonderful names to conjure with, such as 'Greasy Butcher', an old, red-skinned variety of apple from the South Hams. Prior to its discovery in 1995 in an old orchard five miles away, the cider apple 'Spotted Dick' hadn't been heard of since the 1940s. Another variety, 'Golden Bittersweet', was also revived from the last surviving trees. Kevin explains: "People



**THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: BENCH GRAFTING TAKES PLACE DURING WINTER. NEWLY BENCH-GRAFTED YOUNG BEECH TREES. BENCH-GRAFTED GOLDEN ALDER. ADAM MONTAGUE LOADS UP THE HOT-PIPE SYSTEM.**

bring us all sorts of bits and pieces to find out what they are. Sometimes we have to point out we're not a charity but it works both ways. They get answers, the tree is saved and we get something we can graft on and sell."

Part of Thornhayes' success is due to the fact that it draws on the best traditional practices and marries them with innovation and constant experimentation. The land runs on a field and paddock system that allows each growing area to rest and recuperate for a minimum of three years, which is essential in combating the tree growers' enemy, replant disorder – when rosaceous trees such as sorbus, apples and pears do not thrive if they are planted in land where the same type of tree grew before. The fallow ground is ploughed, sowed and then used for grazing a herd of Red Devon cattle that do their bit by returning plenty of manure to the rich, loamy soil.

Attention to detail is the constant watchword here. In March, as we watched the tail end of the season's second-year maiden fruit trees being lifted to order, each one was placed in a sack, ready to be heeled into a holding area before being dispatched. No tree ever spends more than an hour out of the ground. Even the packaging is ultra-meticulous. "I've just had a chap on the phone saying he was delighted with the trees but was off to have a lie down because it took him half an hour to unwrap each one," Kevin chuckles with pride.

With such a vast range of trees Kevin is always looking for ways to guarantee larger and more reliable stocks. Rootstocks are only bought from trusted suppliers. If they aren't readily available or are of variable quality the nursery will propagate them themselves.

It is during the short, cold, winter months that the nursery is at its busiest. From November onwards, when the bench grafting starts in earnest, Kevin generally takes on two or three temporary staff to supplement the five permanent members of his team. This activity tails off towards the end of February and, with the majority of orders also lifted, attention turns to field grafting until April, weather permitting. "We are experimenting all the time because we've gone beyond the point where there are other people out there doing it and it's not in any book you can pick up," he says. "We put a lot of emphasis on training the staff so that they are not just good at the job but can problem solve at the same time."

Such an innovation is the hot-pipe grafting bench, which is in action between March and the end of April. A more professional-looking bit of kit it would be hard to imagine, even though it was designed and built in a couple of weeks by Keith Grant, one of Kevin's team of grafters and a former BT engineer. The system involves a heated tube with individual bays for each piece of graft wood. The spot heat on the graft stimulates the callus and can increase the rate of growth of species and is specifically used on species that are troublesome to graft by conventional means, particularly birches, walnuts and some oaks. That day's subject, in the hands of Keith and his colleague Adam Montague, was material from a highly unusual, century-old golden Italian alder (*Alnus cordata*), sent in by a tree enthusiast. It should soon be another addition to that burgeoning list, but cataloguing a new arrival is one bit of computer work that Kevin doesn't object to.



# REVELATIONS

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THORNHAYES NURSERY



## THORNHAYES FRUIT TREES

Fruit, including, apples, pears, apricots, plums, cherries, walnuts, medlars, quince, mulberries, chestnuts, cobnuts and figs, now accounts for 50 per cent of the trees grown at Thornhayes Nursery. The emphasis is on fruit trees that do well in the wet and windy conditions of the south-west. Each variety in their exhaustive and informative catalogue has been given a scab resistance rating, from 0-5, based on several seasons with no chemical controls.

## GETTING THERE

*Thornhayes Nursery, St Andrews Wood, Dulford, Cullompton, Devon EX15 2DF is off the A373 just after the village of Dulford. Turn off the M5 at Junction 28. Tel 01884 266746, fax 01884 266739, email [trees@thornhayes.demon.co.uk](mailto:trees@thornhayes.demon.co.uk) or visit [www.thornhayes-nursery.co.uk](http://www.thornhayes-nursery.co.uk). Open Monday-Friday 8-4.30 all year and Saturday 9-12 November to March only.*

## ADVICE AND AFTERCARE

Kevin Croucher's do's and don'ts for planting trees in the 'wet west', or anywhere with heavy clay soils:

- Don't dig huge planting holes
- Don't plant large trees where small ones will do better
- Don't tall-stake trees. If the tree needs staking, use a short one to anchor the roots
- Don't use a strimmer around the base of trees
- Don't put organic material in the planting hole. Use it as a surface mulch after planting
- Don't allow grass or weeds to grow around the base of the tree for at least two to three years after planting
- If young trees need a little support, loosely tie them to a cane, still allowing some wind movement
- Trees planted as small specimens normally catch up and overtake those planted large within ten years
- Large, luxury tree pits with broken-up soil and added organic matter act as sumps in wet weather and on heavy soils. Trees can rot in them and die before they grow away or develop cankers

## THORNHAYES ORNAMENTALS

Many of the ornamentals at Thornhayes have a strong local flavour. There is the Lucombe oak (*Quercus x hispanica* 'Lucombeana') a cross between the turkey and cork oaks, first propagated in 1760 by a nursery in Exeter. You'll also find the Glastonbury thorn (*Crataegus monogyna* 'Biflora'); the singular, thorny Plymouth pear (*Pyrus cordata*); and the handsome cut-leaved lime (*Tilia platyphyllos* 'Laciniata'), propagated from an original specimen in Humphry Repton's famous arboretum at Endsleigh House, near Tavistock, Devon. ■