

# Nursery that has grown up to be one of the best in the country



**THRIVING BUSINESS:** Kevin Croucher at Thomhayes Nursery, in Dufford, near Cullington  
GARETH WILLIAMS NEE210\_08L\_004

# WEEKEND IN THE GARDEN

KEVIN Croucher has gained a reputation as an expert supplier of trees and can count people like the National Trust and Royal Horticultural Society among his clients. And he's also been called on to provide an orchard for the Queen.

He spoke to **Tom Gard**



**A**NYONE who has ever dreamed of jacking it all in, moving to the country and starting their own plant nursery would do well to take a leaf out of Kevin Croucher's book.

I've met scores of nurserymen over the years (myself included) who soon find that their new, idyllic lifestyle doesn't always quite pay the bills and that they have to keep their hand in with the former day job to make ends meet.

To truly succeed, you not only have to know your subject inside-out but you must have total faith in a long-term plan, whatever the hardships along the way, and a steely determination to be better than the rest.

Kevin has all these attributes in spades, which is why, from a standing start just 11 years ago, his Thornhayes Nursery, just outside Dulford, near Cullompton, is now widely regarded as the best of its kind in the country.

When Kevin and his wife Pat bought Thornhayes in 1991, it was nothing but 13 acres of bare silage fields. For six years, while they built the business up, the couple lived in what is basically a large shed, 40ft by 20ft, on the site, Pat continuing her career as a technical editor while Kevin concentrated on bulking up stock. Not for a minute did he consider going back to his job at Bicton College of Agriculture, where he had lectured in arboriculture and landscape design.



## HOW TO FIND THORNHAYES NURSERY

THORNHAYES is about five minutes' drive from Junction 28 of the M5 on the A373, in the direction Honiton. When you reach the village of Dulford, slow down and look out for the crossroads by the red telephone box, turning right and then first right again from where the nursery is signposted a quarter of a mile further on.

It should be emphasised that Thornhayes is a nursery, not a garden centre. The public is welcome to look around but there is no show area or coffee shop. Outside the summer months it is recommended you bring a pair of boots.

For more information on Thornhayes Nursery, telephone 01884 266746.

The website [www.thornhayes-nursery.co.uk](http://www.thornhayes-nursery.co.uk) has a downloadable catalogue, as well as a picture gallery



It's another thing that Kevin has over many would-be nurserymen — a rock-solid background in his chosen vocation. Prior to Bicton there were three years at agricultural college in Yorkshire, followed by another three working for local authorities on large-scale planting schemes and tree preservation. Trees are in Kevin's blood and he had been planning to start a nursery a good decade before he actually took the plunge.

Thornhayes has established its still burgeoning reputation of an unstinting pursuit of excellence. It employs the best traditional techniques and combines them with modern innovations and experimentation in propagation in an effort to ensure that every tree is not just healthy but is as exact a replica of its parent as possible.

The majority, particularly the fruit trees, are ground grown, dug to order and supplied bare-root (they tend to

be much more dependable and disease-resistant this way), with no tree spending more than an hour out of the ground before being dispatched. Each growing area is alternately rested for a minimum of three years to combat disease and Kevin now employs five full-time staff who are highly trained and capable of dealing with almost any query. If they don't know the answer, they just ask him.

"About 50 per cent of our customers come to us through recommendations," Kevin said proudly. "What we do is to combine plantsmanship with professional growing skills, which is something you don't often get.

"You'll find nurseries with unusual plants but who lack the know-how to grow them properly or the big boys who have the skills but, because they produce on such a scale, can't offer the range."

It is accepted wisdom that before you design or plant up a new garden,

have a good look locally to see what thrives and what doesn't. It is simple common sense, really, and is the basis on which Thornhayes is founded. If you want to know what grows well in the South West, they have the answer. The nursery only stocks trees that grow successfully in the region's wet, windy and humid conditions, based on at least two years' growing without any major chemical intervention. "We are ruthless," Kevin insists. "If a tree develops problems or its reliability is suspect we junk it, simple as that."

The nursery is split between ornamental trees and fruit. Kevin had intended to specialise entirely in ornamentals, and they still make up half the trees on offer. The tip of the iceberg includes the best selection of hawthorns (*Crataegus*) in the country, scores of rare and new birches (*Betula*) and exclusive magnolias grafted from private collections.

**B**UT Kevin has also always had an interest in fruit trees and the establishment of the nursery coincided with a resurgence in interest in local fruit varieties and orchards.

As the nursery's reputation spread, Kevin's expertise was increasingly sought for identification and propagation of new material.

In some cases these were centuries-old varieties that were on the point of extinction, often just a handful of neglected trees uncovered in a derelict orchard.

He said: "I remember getting a call from a friend who had bought a cottage in Cornwall and had found some apples growing on the railway embankment behind it. They turned out to be an old local variety called Fairfield. If she hadn't got in touch with us, that variety probably wouldn't be with us any more."

Along with other dedicated enthusiasts, Kevin has helped support a renaissance in South West orchards. Not just apples, but pears, plums and cherries too. He still works as an advisor for conservation organisations such as Save Our Orchards and South Devon's Orchard Link and runs courses on grafting and budding propagation techniques.

It's a two-way street, as if a new discovery has the right credentials Kevin will build up enough stock to offer it commercially, making it worth his while at the same time as ensuring its long-term survival.

The nursery's annual catalogue is more like a book. The apples alone cover nine sides of A4 and the information is on the exhaustive side of exhaustive. A typical entry reads: 'Variety — Longstem. Origin — Devon. Flavour — Full Bittersweet. Use — Cider. Season — Late. Comments — A useful variety brought to our attention by JR Pearse of Ivybridge'.

In the case of apples and pears, this is also accompanied by a rating, from 0-5, that tells you how resistant each is to scab infection, the bane of the fruit grower's life.

As a general rule, if a tree can prosper in the climactic rigours this part of Devon can throw at it, it will also prosper right along the rest of the western side of Britain, and, with a few exceptions where lower temperatures are actually beneficial, in the gentler and warmer conditions of the east.

The emphasis on offering only quality trees that are reliable ("toughies", Kevin affectionately calls many of them), coupled with an almost-unrivalled range, has earned Thornhayes a nationwide reputation for excellence.

When the Lord Lieutenant of Devon decided to present the Queen with an orchard of 76 Devon apple varieties to be planted at Sandringham as part of the Golden Jubilee celebrations, he didn't look further than Thornhayes. Kevin's other clients now include the National Trust, RHS Rosemoor and Wisley, and the Royal Parks.

He hasn't lost touch with his roots, though, if you'll pardon the pun.

As he says: "We are as happy to serve the little old lady from up the road who wants one tree as we are to serve the Queen."



## THORNHAYES TOP TIPS

THE Thornhayes catalogue includes a highly comprehensive section on the planting and aftercare of trees. Here is a summary of some of the most important points:

**1** Remove grass and weeds from the planting area and keep an area of at least 1m diameter clear for at least two years.

**2** As tree planting is generally conducted in late autumn/winter, don't pre-dig holes, as they are liable to fill with water.

**3** Resist the temptation to dig a big hole and backfill it with organic matter. Particularly on heavy soils, this can result in the tree sitting in a soggy mess until late spring or early summer, promoting disease and waterlogging. With most garden soils, simply loosening compact earth and removing stones will suffice.

**4** Fruit trees should be planted with the graft union above ground, while with ornamentals the graft should be at or just below the surface.

**5** Staking causes a lot of confusion. Field or container-grown trees of up to 8ft can be planted unstaked as long as they are well heeled in. Larger trees have to be staked for the first year or so, but at no higher than 12 inches (30cm) above ground and the ties should be loose enough to allow swaying of the main trunk so the roots are encouraged to anchor themselves.