



Helen Babbs

Helen writes, gardens and keeps goats on her family smallholding in West Wales. In the best HF tradition, her writing work is done in a converted stable block. Examples of her articles about all aspects of smallholding can be found on her website: helenbabbs.co.uk



QUINCE

Helen Babbs learns about quince – still a relatively rare but **easy-to-grow** fruit

At first sight, you might take a quince fruit for a lumpy apple or pear, but the first sniff of this large yellow fruit shows them to be quite different. A couple of quince will scent a room – a carrier bagful in a car is almost overwhelming! In the kitchen, quinces are used like cooking apples, imparting their unique scent and flavour to pies, jams and jellies, and even a traditional fruit ‘cheese’ which makes an excellent accompaniment to both cheeses and cold meats. Although these delicious fruits may be hard to find in shops, the good news is that they are very easy to grow at home!

QUINCE FROM TREES

The quince tree, *Cydonia oblonga*, is something of a ‘lost prince’ of fruit. First introduced into Britain in the 14th century, quinces were an essential part of a traditional orchard, but in most fruit tree catalogues today you will only find one or two varieties, usually listed in the ‘rare and unusual’ section. This is a great shame, as leaving aside their tasty harvest, the trees are pretty in their own right. Quince has relatively large, glossy green leaves covered with silvery down on the underside. In late spring, once the leaves are fully open, they have large, pink-tinged flowers similar in size and shape to a wild rose. Unlike apples, these are borne singly at the tips of the branches all over the tree.

Quince is fully hardy, but needs a long growing season for the fruit to ripen fully. They are best planted in a sunny, sheltered corner, or even grown in a pot and moved into the greenhouse or polytunnel in the autumn. Quince trees are naturally quite large, normally reaching 3–5 metres in height, but if grafted onto a dwarfing rootstock some of the smaller varieties will do well in a large container.

Varieties of quince divide into two types: acid and sweet. Acid-type varieties such as ‘Serbian Gold’, ‘Vranja’ or ‘Ekmek’ are more well-known in the UK, with their

hard, rather gritty flesh and sharp flavour when raw. Sweet varieties such as ‘Isfahan’ are not quite as common, but make a delicious alternative to a dessert apple with



Quince blossom. Photo © A & N Brunton.



Photo © DT Brown.



*Ekmek – a reliable and productive acid-type quince.
Photo © Keepers Nursery.*



Japanese quince blossom.



Japanese quince

their fine-textured and juicy flesh, as well as being suitable for cooking. The 'Krymsk' variety even has a pineapple flavour! However, sweet quinces take longer again to ripen, so really do need a perfect site.

QUINCE FROM BUSHES

If you don't have a sunny, sheltered corner, you might be thinking that growing quince isn't for you, but very similar fruits are produced by Japanese quince, *Chaenomeles*, a tough, thorny shrub commonly grown in the UK as an ornamental flowering shrub or hedge. Like quince trees, Japanese quince is often overlooked in terms of fruit production, yet provides a valued autumn delicacy in many south-east Asian countries. Unlike the larger trees, Japanese quince bushes are tough and adaptable, tolerating any soil or position. There are various species available, ranging from 1 metre to 2.5 metres in height, all of which produce fruit. If you're short on space, they can even be trained up flat against a wall or trellis.

Red, pink or white flowers appear before the leaves in early spring, with the bonus of being very attractive to bees. The fruits are smaller than regular quince, and always need cooking and sweetening, but have the same powerful scent, and are even richer in pectin and vitamin C, giving



*'Vranja' – another popular acid-type variety.
Photo © Blackmoor Nurseries.*

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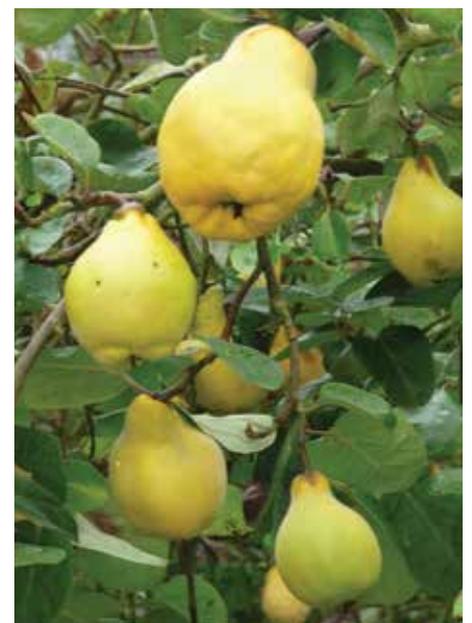
them the occasional nickname 'northern lemon.' Rather than needing a long growing season, Japanese quince are best collected after the first few frosts, which help them ripen.

PLANTING

Both tree and bush quinces are planted as for any other fruit tree or bush, either bare-rooted during the winter, or as a pot-grown plant at any time of year. Quince trees in particular need plenty of well-rotted organic matter added to the soil and a thick layer of mulch around their base after planting, to ensure a steady water supply to the roots throughout the year. Whether or not quinces need damp soil to flourish is a matter of debate – mine is planted at the damper end of the garden and is

doing well. Young quince trees can be rather slender and whippy, so usually need a stake to ensure they grow upright.

Like apples or pears, with their large, hard fruits, quinces don't need to be grown in a protective fruit cage. Japanese quince with its sturdy thorns actually makes a good boundary hedge, which is said to deter even deer, although I have only tried it with cats and rabbits!



*Although quince is self-fertile, they will set more fruit if cross-pollinated by another tree.
Photo © Blackmoor Nurseries.*

GROWING AND PRUNING

Once planted, quinces don't require a great deal of care, but as with all fruit trees, it's best to give them an annual layer of well-rotted compost or manure around their base in late winter. A mulch of straw, grass clippings or even black plastic landscape fabric over this will control weeds as well as reducing the need for watering. Pot-grown quinces will need regular watering during the summer, and either potting-up or repotting with fresh, soil-based compost each spring. Although they will be moved into the greenhouse or polytunnel in the autumn to allow the fruit to ripen, a pot-grown quince should be moved outside again over winter as they need cold temperatures for next year's flower buds to form.

Unless you are training them against a trellis, Japanese quince can be left unpruned to grow into a large shrub, or lightly trimmed as an informal hedge. Quince trees need more formative pruning, with annual winter pruning during their first three years to develop

them into an 'open goblet' shape, the same as for an apple tree. Once this basic framework has developed, quince trees need very little pruning. As the blossom develops at the tips of the branches, new growth needs to be left un-pruned for a good crop of flowers and fruit the following year, so you will only need to cut back any crossing or damaged branches, plus any overly long shoots spoiling the basic bush shape.

HARVESTING

Quince fruit ripen in October, when the fruit gradually turns from a pale yellow to a deeper, golden yellow and the distinctive scent develops. Ideally the fruit should be left to ripen on the tree, but will need to be rescued if frost is forecast! Putting the picked fruit in a bowl with a ripe banana, or covering them with a cloth, will help finish off the ripening process. Fruits on Japanese quince are best left on the bush until after the first frost, which converts the starch in the fruit to sugars, making them a little less bitter.

Either type of quince should keep for about a month in a cool place, stored as for apples, but they will need to be stored away from other fruit which can acquire the quince scent.

COOKING WITH QUINCE

For cooking, quince can be used in any recipe where you would use cooking apples, with a little extra sugar to balance the more bitter taste. When cut open, quince turn brown very rapidly, but this doesn't mean they've gone bad. The acid-type varieties and Japanese quince cook quickly down into a pulp, so do well stewed or in jams and jellies where their high pectin content ensures a good, rapid 'set.' Japanese quince can also be put through a juice extractor for a tangy, citrus-flavoured juice. Sweet quince remain intact on cooking, so do well in pies or chutneys where you want whole pieces of fruit. They also turn an attractive deep red colour which adds extra interest!

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Membrillo

The most traditional method of preserving quince is as quince 'cheese,' also known by its Spanish name of 'Membrillo.' This is a semi-solid paste served either as a savoury accompaniment to meat and cheese, or cut into small squares and coated with icing sugar for a home-grown alternative to Turkish Delight! There are many recipes available but the following one is particularly reliable.

INGREDIENTS

1.5kg peeled, chopped quince
The juice and rind of 1 lemon
A vanilla pod
2kg sugar (approximately)

METHOD

- 1 Simmer the quince, lemon rind and vanilla pod in the lemon juice, adding just enough water to cover the fruit. Once the quince has softened, drain off the liquid and remove the vanilla pod.
- 2 Weigh the cooked fruit then purée it with a hand-blender to remove any lumps.
- 3 Measure out an equivalent weight of sugar, mix in well with the quince purée and return to the pan.
- 4 Boil for about an hour until the mixture is very thick and almost capable of being sliced, then pour into a deep, well-greased baking tray to chill overnight in the fridge until it has set solid.
- 5 Cut into squares and dust with icing sugar, if desired. Cover or wrap in greaseproof paper and keep chilled.

Membrillo, or quince 'cheese'.
Photo © Rita Fevereiro/Fruit Magpie.

