THE STORY OF THE QUINCE

The earliest known quinces grew wild in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains between Persia and Turkmenistan. This seemingly inhospitable area is actually very fertile and many fruits thrived. A knobbly, irregular-shaped variety still grows wild in this area. The valleys below formed many of the ancient trade routes and quinces spread rapidly westwards and eastwards. To the west they were carried along the old trade routes, reaching the Middle East and then the Mediterranean as Golden Apples, flourishing as they went. To the east they were taken across the deserts of the Silk Road and thence to China where they arrived as the Golden Peaches of Samarkand.

They quickly became very popular and were credited with both mythical and medicinal powers. From ancient times right up to the late Middle Ages quinces were, in most places, more widely used and better known than apples. Related to both apples and pears, it is sometimes hard to identify quinces in classical literature, especially as the Greeks tended to use the term *melon* to refer to both apples and quinces, but it is likely that most golden apples mentioned were actually quinces as they would have been more widely cultivated and better known, particularly in the Levant and southern Europe. It is important to remember that the quinces of central Asia, the Middle East and south America can often be eaten straight from the tree. Quinces were also favoured because it is only comparatively recently that the people of the West have developed such a sweet tooth. Many other regions of the world still appreciate astringent flavours and historically these tastes would have been the norm as sweeteners other than honey were rare and expensive.

One of the quince's earliest possible claims to fame is the Judgement of Paris in Greek mythology. Eris is the Greek goddess of strife and in a foolish miscalculation she was the only god not invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. Understandably furious, she barged into the wedding ceremony and threw down a fruit inscribed 'For the most beautiful.' This fruit was described as a golden apple and was, almost certainly, a quince. H,era, Athene and Aphrodite each claimed the fruit, so Zeus decided that the matter should be settled by Paris. Hera offered him empire, Athene guaranteed military glory and Aphrodite promised him the most beautiful woman in the world. This was Helen, who was unfortunately already married to Menelaus of Sparta. Paris gave the fruit to Aphrodite and she in turn helped him win Helen, thereby sparking off the Trojan War. The main result of this episode for quinces is that ever after they have been regarded as Aphrodite's fruit. They are associated with love and fertility and it was believed that the trees sprang up wherever she walked, alongside the better known flowers.

The quince's link with Aphrodite ensured it an unofficial place in wedding ceremonies. In 594 BC Solon was elected chief magistrate of Athens. He was a politician, but also a poet and although he is described by George Forrest in *The Oxford History of the Classical World* as being 'self-centred, self-righteous and just a trifle pompous' he at least kept written records and concerned himself with more than simply amassing power. He tried to establish peace and democracy by writing a new law code and instituting social and political reforms. In due course he set down the format for wedding ceremonies and the quince's part was officially recorded. From then on quinces have been part of the Greek wedding ceremony and are often baked in a cake with honey and sesame seeds. This is said to symbolize the couple's enduring commitment to each other through good times and bad. The fruits are often thrown to the bride and groom as they go to their new home and the bride is presented with a quince to ensure fertility. One myth says that pregnant women who indulge their appetites in generous quantities of quince will give birth to industrious and highly intelligent children. Edward

Lear was following an ancient precedent when he included quinces in the Owl and the Pussy-cat's wedding feast.

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
The Owl looked up to the stars above,
And sang to a small guitar,
'O lovely Pussy! O Pussy my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are
You are,
You are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!'
Pussy said to the Owl 'You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!
O let us be married! Too long we have tarried:
But what shall we do for a ring?'
They sailed away, for a year and a day
To the land where the Bong-tree grows
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood
With a ring at the end of his nose,
His nose,
His nose,
With a ring at the end of his nose.

'Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling
Your ring?' Said the Piggy 'I will.'
So they took it away, and were married next day
By the Turkey who lives on the hill.
They dined on mince and slices of quince
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon,
The moon,
The moon,
They danced by the light of the moon.

(Edward Lear (1812–1888), *Nonsense Verse*)

Golden apples or quinces also feature in the myth of the twelve tasks of Heracles. As the eleventh task he had to fetch the fruit from the golden apple tree in Hera's sacred garden on the slopes of Mount Atlas. The tree had been Mother Earth's wedding gift to Hera and she had created her divine garden around it. Guarded by the dragon Ladon and surrounded by a high wall, scrumping from the garden was clearly a formidable task. Ladon was curled round the base of the tree and Heracles had to shoot him with an arrow, before persuading Atlas to fetch the fruit. This proved surprisingly easy, as Atlas was carrying the globe on his shoulders and Heracles offered to support it for him in return for the fruit. This was a popular tale for sculptors and artists and the scene of Heracles supporting the world while Atlas brings him the golden apples can be seen on a white-ground vase in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. On this vase the fruits do look remarkably knobbly, giving further support to the idea that they were actually quinces, rather than apples. There is also a splendid statue of Heracles in the British Museum in London, showing him standing in front of the tree with three golden apples in his hand. Again, the fruits could easily be quinces, rather than apples.

There are records of quinces being cultivated 5,000 years ago by the Mesopotamians and from 100 BC onwards they were popular in Palestine long before apples. It is quite likely that the fruit in both

the Garden of Eden and the Song of Solomon were quinces rather than apples.

The Romans also cultivated quinces, particularly for their medicinal qualities. There is a terracotta quince in the British Museum which is over two thousand years old. It was made in Apulia in southern Italy between 300 and 250 BC and was obviously originally part of a collection as a pomegranate has also survived. The fruit is life size and you can really see the knobbliness. Cato, in his farming manual of 202 BC, *On Agriculture,* included a number of recipes and recommended growing three types of quince: *Strutea*, *Cotonea* and *Mustea,* a variety which ripened well. Pliny, a Roman naturalist in the first century AD, praised their medicinal virtues, claiming, among other things, that they warded off the evil eye. He mentions the *Mulvan* variety, which was the only cultivated quince at the time that could be eaten raw. Quinces also featured in *The Satyricon*, by Petronius. Written around 65 AD this was a huge work of which only a small part survives. It is an amusing literary portrait of Roman society at the time and follows the adventures of two scholars as they wander through the cities of the Mediterranean. In Rome they go to a dinner given by Trimalchio, a vulgar freedman who has considerably more money than style. The whole event becomes more and more tasteless, culminating with a dessert including 'Quinces, with thorns implanted to make them look like sea urchins.' It is not clear whether this dish is actually eaten, but quince dishes were obviously well known enough for Petronius to use them in his book. The Greeks and Romans preserved quinces in honey, giving rise to the name *melimelum* from the Greek for honey apple. In turn this evolved into the Spanish *marmello* and thence *membrillo* which is probably the best known use for quinces nowadays.

An early use for quinces which has now largely vanished was marmalade. Many fruits contain pectin, which allows them to set as jam or jelly when cooked. This quality was first discovered in quinces by the Romans, who cooked the fruit prior to preserving it. Quinces were the only fruits that needed cooking first and for a long time it was assumed that they were the only fruits that would set in this way. The resulting conserve was popular on the Continent and came to

Britain in the sixteenth century via Portugal as *marmelada,* from the Portuguese for quinces, *marmelo.* It was expensive and recipes soon began appearing in British recipe books, again only using quinces. Similar preserves had been made since Roman times, but it is only with the arrival of *marmelada* that they become really popular. The name soon became marmalade and until the eighteenth century this usually meant a conserve made with quinces. Gradually, other fruits were used and over time oranges or citrus fruits were used for marmalade and other fruits for jams or conserves. Britain is the only European country to make this distinction; elsewhere *marmelada* and related words refer to fruit preserves of all types.

The Greeks themselves were always great quince producers and developed a variety which was superior to the traditional *Strythion.* It came from the Minoan port of Kydonia or Cydonia (now Chania) in Crete and although the fruit was smaller and more astringent it had more flavour. Gradually the name for all quinces changed from *Strythion* to *Cydonia* and this is the Latin name by which tree quinces are now known, to distinguish them from the flowering or Japanese varieties (*Chaenomeles*). The original Latin term for the fruit was *cotoneum* and this, in turn, has evolved into the French *coin* or *coings.* In England in the Middle Ages the Old French name *coyn* or *quoyn* was used but by the fourteenth century the words had merged and the name quince was widespread.

Quinces probably travelled to Britain from France where they were widespread. The Emperor Charlemagne may not have introduced them to the region but he certainly recognized their value, as demonstrated by his order, in 812, that they were to be planted in the royal garden. They certainly grew in more southerly climes and it is from early medieval times that one of the only poems exclusively about quinces dates. Its author was Shafer ben Utman al-Mushafi, vizier to Caliph Al-Hakam II of Cordoba in Andalusia until his death in 982. The poem was rediscovered by the Spanish scholar Emilio García Lopez in 1928 and this translation by A.L. Lloyd was one of the many fine and apposite quotations included by the late Jane Grigson in her *Fruit Book* of 1982.

It is yellow in colour, as if it wore a daffodil
tunic, and it smells like musk, a penetrating smell.

It has the perfume of a loved woman and the same
hardness of heart, but it has the colour of the
impassioned and scrawny lover.

Its pallor is borrowed from my pallor; its smell
is my sweetheart's breath.

When it stood fragrant on the bough and the leaves
had woven for it a covering of brocade,

I gently put up my hand to pluck it and set it
like a censer in the middle of my room.

It had a cloak of ash-coloured down hovering over
its smooth golden body,

and when it lay naked in my hand, with nothing more than
its daffodil-coloured shift,

it made me think of her I cannot mention, and I feared
the ardour of my breath would shrivel it in my fingers.

Quinces were first recorded in England in 1275 when King Edward I planted four at the Tower of London. It is possible that he was influenced in this by the *Dictionarius* of John of Garland which had been written in 1250. This provided an inventory of a good Parisian garden and included quinces as one of the required fruits. The trees planted at the Tower cost sixpence each. A modern equivalent is hardly possible, but think £15. In 1292 more trees were planted at Westminster. These were priced at forty-one shillings for 100 (think more than £1,000), which is cheaper per sapling, but the variation may simply be due to the bulk purchase. Chaucer mentions them, using

the term *coines*, a variation of the French *coings*. They were certainly well known in England by the fourteenth century, with cookery books including recipes for quince pies and preserves. From then until the end of the nineteenth century quinces feature more prominently than apples in most English cookery books. They make fewer appearances in Scottish books, but this is possibly because the trees were associated with the warmer climates of southern Europe and were considered too delicate to survive. Most people were probably unaware that the trees originally came from considerably colder regions in central Asia.

Quinces rapidly gained popularity in the Middle Ages. They were easy to preserve and, as well as being delicious, they were credited with a number of medicinal qualities. The fact that they had to be cooked did not matter, as raw fruit was regarded with suspicion and felt to be potentially dangerous to one's health. This was largely based on the fact that when there was a glut people tended to overeat and make themselves ill. Fresh fruit was not really regarded as safe until the eighteenth century and till then the prudent way to eat it was to cook it first with sugar and spices to preserve it, or make a purée which could then be baked in pies. Quinces' popularity was further increased as, along with oranges and pomegranates, they were regarded as protection against plagues in general and the Black Death in particular. Quince paste, or chardequynce as it became known in England, featured at the end of many meals as it was attractive, tasted good and did you good. The paste was frequently set in moulds and could be gilded for special occasions. This paste was also called cotoniak or paste of Genoa, with quiddony or quiddoniak referring to a translucent jelly which was similar. In France it was called *cotignac*, with the best being *Cotignac d'Orleans*. This was boiled with sugar to form a clear jelly which was an attractive ruby colour. It was then poured into small round wooden boxes to set. These were often presented to visiting royalty when they passed through outlying towns and villages. In 1429 Joan of Arc was presented with a gift of *cotignac* when she arrived at Orleans to liberate it from the English. Ever since, *cotignac* has been made in moulds of her likeness.

Medieval cooks at the highest levels in royal and aristocratic households undoubtedly had a reasonable knowledge of the other characteristics of each dish as well as its taste. Remedies and festival recipes had close links and the cooks would have ensured that the humours of the various foods matched. It was considered important that the four humours (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic) were balanced within a meal and although this wasn't particularly scientific it did make rough sense and most medieval banquets were actually quite well balanced and nutritious even by today's standards. For their medicinal qualities, quinces were frequently included at the end of banquets.

The menu from the coronation of Richard III in 1483 survives and the last named dish on it is 'Quynces Bake.' The recipe states that the quinces should be cored, filled with sugar and ginger and baked in a pastry coffin. Quinces and ginger went together well and were both regarded as aids to digestion. Sugar was felt to be good for the stomach and so this would have been an ideal end to a heavy feast. (See page 42 for a modern variation of this recipe.)

The Tudor aphrodisiacs, in the recipe section on page 97, would have offered much the same benefits to the digestion – with the added advantage of helping in bed later on in the evening. Quince marmalade was regarded as an aphrodisiac and often had almonds added to encourage fertility. Its reputation in Tudor times was so great that it was served to Queen Mary, who was desperate to conceive a son once she had achieved the throne in 1554 and married Philip of Spain. Unfortunately, it failed, and although the reputation persisted, the status of marmalade fell somewhat during the seventeenth century if the equivalence of 'marmulet madams' with prostitutes is any guide. In 1727 Edward Ward remarked 'More marmulet madams will be met strolling in the fields than honest women.'

Another sixteenth-century queen, Mary, Queen of Scots, also used quinces, but this time to combat seasickness when crossing from Calais to Scotland in 1561. Quinces were long regarded not only as an aid to digestion but also as a prevention against sickness. In 1579 William Langham wrote in *The Garden of Health* that marmalade 'is

very good to strengthen the stomach and to keep the meat therein till it be perfectly digested.'

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries quinces remained popular in Britain, being added to pies and tarts and made into sauces to accompany game. John Parkinson, botanist to King Charles II, said 'there is no fruit growing in the land that is of so many excellent uses as this, serving well to make many dishes of meat for the table, as for banquets, and much more for their physical virtues'. 'Quynces Bake' still appeared at banquets and was reputed to be a favourite dish of Sir Isaac Newton. In 1611 John Tradescant had imported the 'Portingall' or 'Portugal', which has remained one of the best varieties up to the present day (it is now usually known as 'Lusitanica'). By the middle of the seventeenth century demand outstripped supply and quinces were imported from Flanders. At this time it was common to store quinces for as long as two years in a barrel, submerged in perry or ale. Periodically the alcohol could be removed and drunk and the fruit topped up with fresh alcohol, as necessary.

Popular as they were, quinces rarely featured in literature. Juliet's nurse mentions that quinces will be eaten at the wedding feast, but Shakespeare's most famous quince, Peter Quince, the carpenter in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* sadly has nothing to do with the fruit. His name derives from *quines* or *quoins,* the wedges which carpenters use to steady the pieces they are cutting.

By the nineteenth century, the balance had changed and there was such a surplus of quinces in Sussex that the fruit was made into wine. This was partly because horticultural methods had improved, but also because the quince was beginning to lose its status as more soft fruit was grown.

In North America there were no native quinces, but they were introduced by the European settlers and by 1720 they were thriving in Virginia. Here the Reverend W.W. Meech raised a variety which is still grown today: 'Meech's Prolific', a tree which lives up to its name. Gradually they spread south and became extremely popular in Latin America where in some areas they had been introduced directly by Spanish and Portuguese settlers. Here they were eaten raw, partly

because the climate produced sweeter fruit and also because the population was used to more astringent tastes. Today, some of the largest commercial quince plantations are in Paraguay where the trees do well.

By the beginning of the twentieth century quinces had lost much of their allure and mystery. With the decline of servants and the quickening pace of life they were increasingly regarded as too much bother to cook and so fell out of favour. The trees were still planted in gardens, but as a result of the plant-hunters in Victorian times so many more species were available to gardeners and orchardists and, with the wider choice, the trees also became scarcer. In the twenty-first century the assumption that quick is best has been questioned and a new emphasis on home-grown produce has meant that many old varieties are coming back into favour. It is to be hoped that quinces will benefit from these changes.

QUINCES IN THE GARDEN

A hundred years ago quince trees would have been found in almost every orchard in Britain. They would have been considered on a par with apples, pears and plums and grown in both commercial orchards and domestic gardens. The fruit then fell out of favour, but increasingly quinces are regaining their position as popular fruit trees.

They are an attractive addition to almost any garden, regardless of size. They have beautiful blossom in spring, followed by glossy leaves which start off a pale grey-green in spring and during summer develop into a dark green, with felty white undersides. These then turn attractive shades of yellow and brown in autumn. Quinces naturally grow into bushy trees, with interestingly contorted branches that look attractive even when bare in winter.

The fragrant blossom consists of little, pale pink flowers similar to a dog rose. The buds are varying shades of pink, some striped, like a barber's pole. As the flowers open fully they fade until they are almost pure white. The fruit grows on the tree towards the end of summer and looks particularly lovely as it turns from pale green to rich golden yellow, with a furry grey coat. The fruits themselves are usually pear-shaped and give off a sweet fragrance as they ripen. As an added bonus the spring blossom will attract beneficial insects to your garden and if you leave a few fruits on the trees they will provide winter food for birds and squirrels.

As well as all this, the trees are reasonably disease-free and are easy to look after. There is also a certain romance about quinces, with their myths, legends and illustrious history. Robin Lane Fox writes a wonderful description of their arrival in China: 'I like to think of its

first arrival from central Asia in the exquisite circles of Tang China, where it would have accompanied the dances and new music, furs, jewellery and radical religions which burst on Chinese society from their source in the distant West. Away beyond the White Dragon Dunes and the Mountains of Heaven lay the home of the Golden Peaches.' As he then says, 'The thought sustains one's interest in a quince tree even when it has lost its leaves.'

FAMILY

Quinces were originally thought of as a type of pear and were first called *Pyrus cydonia,* or the Cydonian pear. Later they were given a separate classification and are now properly called *Cydonia oblonga.* They are sometimes called tree quinces to distinguish them from *Chaenomeles* or the flowering quince, which is again a separate plant. Flowering quinces are usually grown as shrubs or climbers. Their blossom comes in a huge range of colours from white to orange to deep crimson. The fruits are edible, but are really only suitable for jelly. The two quinces are distantly related, both belonging to the rose family, *Rosaceae,* but for the beautiful trees and a delicious crop for the kitchen, it is *Cydonia* that you need.

SITE

Quinces come from the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, a region with long, hot summers and harsh winters. They are fully hardy and will grow anywhere in Britain. Our fruits may not be as large as those grown in the Middle East or central Asia, but they are still delicious and the trees will thrive anywhere from Inverary in Scotland to Faversham in Kent.

Ideally the trees like a long, hot summer, but also need a cold spell in winter. They become dormant in the autumn to protect the new growth and then need about 400 hours of temperatures below 7°C to break the dormancy. If they do not get this the blossom (and the resulting harvest) will be delayed or poor. Quinces can easily tolerate temperatures as low as -26°C, but do not particularly like long periods of cold, damp weather or harsh winds. For this reason they grow

particularly well against south-facing walls or in the sheltered corners of walled gardens. As the trees flower in late spring, frost is not usually a problem, a chilly wind can do far more harm.

If you have a sheltered garden and sufficient space, quince trees look particularly lovely grown in the middle of a lawn where their rounded, umbrella shape can fully develop. They look equally good grown in a small courtyard and will even thrive in a pot as long as it is sufficiently large and you tend the plant well. One of the great advantages of quince trees is that they are self-fertile, so you should get a reasonable crop of fruit even if you only have one tree.

An orchard of quince trees or even a mixed orchard is a fantastic thing to create. It will start providing you with fruit a couple of years after you have planted the trees and will quickly develop into a beautiful part of the garden. Early monasteries always had orchards, often with quinces predominating. Surprisingly, you don't need that much space or even that many trees to create the feel of an orchard. You could grow quinces, apples, pears and even cobnuts and medlars. Just ensure that the site is sheltered and has reasonably good, well drained soil. Plant the trees as you would for individual specimens below, allowing a few feet between each tree and wait for your harvest!

BUYING

Quinces often do not fruit for the first four or five years so there is no great advantage in buying a particularly young tree. It is best to buy two-year-old bushes or three- or four-year-old trees so that the basic shape is already formed for you. This is particularly important if you want to fan-train the plant against a wall.

The size of the tree will be governed by the rootstock. Most fruit trees do not grow true from seed and all the quinces you buy in nurseries will have been grafted onto a rootstock which will grow to a predetermined size. Quince A is the most common stock, giving a tree about 4.5 metres (15 feet) tall and is often described as semi-vigorous. This is the most suitable for growing trees and fan or espalier shapes. Quince C is a semi-dwarfing rootstock, giving trees reaching 3 metres

(10 feet) in height. It is the most suitable for growing in containers, although it is not as tough as Quince A and needs good soil and a sheltered site. EMH is a less common rootstock, is between the other two in size, and is much more robust than Quince C. Always check the rootstock when buying a tree, it is as important as the upper part, which will determine the actual fruit.

The trees are self-fertile but you will probably get a slightly better crop if you grow two cultivars. The best advice is probably to grow more than one tree if you have the space, but don't worry if you only have room for one as you will still get fruit.

TREES FROM SEED

Most people buy established plants from a nursery, but it is perfectly possible to grow your own trees from seed. This will take several years and you need to bear in mind that quinces, like apples, do not grow 'true' from seed. There is no guarantee what sort of quince you will get or, perhaps more importantly, how large it will grow, as it will not be on a predetermined rootstock. You might eventually end up with a monster tree bearing little or no fruit! You can also take cuttings from an existing tree, but again, it is safer to buy your plant from a reputable nursery.

PLANTING

Quince trees are shallow rooted and need a rich, moist soil which does not become waterlogged in winter or dry out in summer. A neutral or slightly acid pH is best but the trees are not really that fussy.

Bare-rooted plants should be moved during the dormant period between November and March. Container-grown plants can be put in at any time. Dig a hole large enough to accommodate the root ball easily and position the tree so that the scion (graft join) is at least 100 mm/4 inches above the surrounding soil. This will ensure that your tree will grow to the size indicated by the rootstock. Backfill the hole and push the soil down gently but firmly. The trees should be staked to allow the stems to grow strongly, as quinces tend to be top heavy. You can leave the stake there permanently, as long as the ties don't

cut into the bark. Put a layer of mulch (well rotted farmyard manure or compost) around the base of the tree, leaving a gap immediately around the trunk to prevent the wood becoming soggy. The mulch will provide nutrients for the tree and stop the soil drying out too fast. This is particularly important on light sandy soils.

If you are planting several trees, or even an orchard, you should place the trees so that there will be a gap between each one when they are fully grown. Taking the cultivar and rootstock into consideration, work out the final spread of each tree and allow a few feet extra between each one. There may seem to be a lot of space when you first put the plants in but a decent gap will ensure that none of your plants are competing against one another for nutrients or sunlight.

CARE

A real advantage to quince trees over other orchard fruits is that, once established, they require little attention. For the first three years you should aim to water regularly, ensuring that the soil remains damp but does not become soggy. Check that the plant is growing into the shape you want and that none of the ties or stakes are rubbing against any of the stems.

You should mulch every spring once the soil has warmed up. Garden compost or well rotted manure are the best mulches as they will nourish the plant, improve the soil structure and provide a protective layer which will prevent water evaporating and deter weeds. Bark chips are one of the most easily available mulches and although they have no nutritional value they look attractive, will prevent water evaporation and, if you buy partly composted chips, they will quickly break down and improve the soil. Spread the mulch in a 50 mm/2 inch layer over the ground, covering roughly the same area as the branches above. This will ensure the area over the roots is covered. Leave a gap between the mulch and the trunk to prevent the wood rotting.

Whether your plant is freestanding or trained against a wall it will benefit from a feed in late winter or early spring. If you mulch with garden compost or well rotted manure you will be providing this

food, but if you use anything else you need to give the plant a feed of general fertilizer, such as organic seaweed. Apply this over an area of soil roughly the same as the tree branches so the area of the roots is covered. This will encourage the tree to spread its roots right out which will make it healthier and more stable.

Quinces bruise incredibly easily and can be damaged just by rubbing against an adjoining fruit on the tree. These bruises are not always visible on the surface. Thin the fruits when they are still small so that they do not jostle against one another. This will give you a better harvest of good fruit in the autumn and removing the excess weight will prevent the branches sagging.

GROWING IN CONTAINERS

Quince trees can be successfully grown in containers although they will never reach the size of freely growing plants and will need extra care throughout their lives. Buy a two- to three-year-old container-grown plant on Quince C rootstock. Use a pot which is at least 600 mm/2 feet deep and the same width. Obviously the larger the pot the healthier and happier the tree will be, so go for the largest one you can fit in your garden. Make sure the pot has holes at the

bottom to allow excess water to soak away and put a 50 mm/2-inch layer of broken crocks in the bottom to help drainage. Use specialist peat-free shrub compost which will provide the necessary starter nutrients for the plant. The nutrients in these composts rarely last more than a few months (check the bag to see exactly how long they will sustain the plant for) and after that you will need to feed the plant regularly. Leave a 50 mm/2-inch gap between the top of the pot and the surface of the soil. This will allow you to add a good layer of mulch each spring. Remove the fruit in the first year so the plant can concentrate on establishing itself. Thereafter feed with a general supplement during the growing season and water regularly so that the soil remains damp but not soggy.

PRUNING AND TRAINING

Quince trees can be trained flat against a wall, but you have to start at an early age because of their naturally twisty growth. You need to aim to create an even spread of main stems with short, productive branches growing out from them. Remember that the main stems will not remain productive indefinitely so you need to keep a supply of shorter stems ready to train out. This sounds easy in theory, but in practice your quince will probably not prove so obliging. The young shoots are quite pliable but you will need to check every couple of months to ensure the plant spreads out properly. Fix the stems to a firm framework such as strong wires or trellis. Use soft garden twine as this will hold the branches in place but will not damage them as they grow. After the first three years the basic framework will be established and you will just need to follow the general pruning guidelines below. The advantage of fan or espalier training is that the tree will take up very little space and will flower and crop well against a sunny wall. If you want to do this it is best to buy a partially trained tree from a specialist nursery.

For freestanding trees a goblet shape is best as this allows light and air through the tree and is reasonably easy to maintain. For the first 4–5 years you should cut back the leaders of the main framework branches by half the previous summer's growth. Side shoots should

be cut back to 2–3 buds. Remember to find out how old your tree is when you buy it as you do not want to carry out this formative pruning for longer than necessary.

After the initial formation, pruning is fairly simple and is best carried out on a 'little and often' basis. You want to maximize the amount of fruit and maintain the shape of the tree and for the health of the plant you should avoid doing anything too drastic. Remember that the trees bear blossom (and fruit) on the spurs and tips of the previous summer's growth so you should only remove what is absolutely necessary. Pruning should be carried out in winter when the tree is dormant. Suckers round the base should be cut away, as should any shoots which appear on the clear part of the trunk. This will establish a good, open framework for your tree and after that it should not need too much ongoing pruning. Remove any dead or weak stems and in particular cut away any stems which start to grow crosswise into the middle of the plant. This keeps the tree open so it gets plenty of light and ventilation which will prevent disease and help the fruit ripen. At Norton Priory, where they have the National Collection of quinces, the aim is to be able to throw your hat through the centre of the tree in winter. If you have an open fire keep the prunings as they make brilliant kindling.

PESTS AND DISEASES

If well looked after, quince trees should be comparatively free of pests and diseases. Leaf blight, which is caused by a fungus, can be a problem. It causes speckled leaves, defoliation and, if severe, fruit loss. It appears in early summer with small spots on the leaves which are reddish at first and then turn black. The spots themselves are not large (about 4 millimetres or one eighth of an inch across) but may join up to form larger patches. In severe cases the shoots may stop growing. The fruit which does grow tends to be affected, with roughened skins and cracks which allow brown rot to develop. There is no chemical cure, but otherwise healthy plants should be able to withstand an attack. Remove any affected leaves, mulch round the base and keep well watered. In autumn rake up and dispose of all the fallen leaves.

This is most important as the fungus can survive the winter amongst fallen debris and will re-infect the plant the following spring. When pruning in the winter, cut away any badly infected branches. If you are worried grow resistant varieties such as 'Vranja' or 'Portugal' and avoid 'Champion', which is the most susceptible.

Aphids, coddling moth, slugworm or caterpillars may attack the fruit but are not usually a serious problem. Since you are going to eat the fruit it seems pointless to spray it with a mass of chemicals; the best way is to keep a regular eye on the fruit so you can spot any infestation and deal with it before it becomes a problem. Spray any aphids with a weak solution of organic washing-up liquid or liquid seaweed, pick off any caterpillars and remove any eaten fruit. Birds and squirrels are unlikely to be a problem as the fruit is so hard that they tend to leave it alone until everything else in the garden has gone, by which time you will have harvested everything you want. Mice can be a nuisance, but they do not usually eat much of the crop.

The only disease which can be a problem is Apple Powdery Mildew. This only occurs when the tree is planted in dry soil and, as with most plant diseases, prevention is really better than cure. If you know your soil has a tendency to dry out, mix in lots of organic

matter before planting and add a layer of mulch at least 50 mm/2 inches deep every spring. If your tree does develop the disease you will notice a white, powdery growth on the leaves. The leaves will drop early and the fruit may also be affected. Cut away and destroy any diseased parts, keep the plant well watered and mulch well the following year to prevent the problem recurring.

HARVESTING AND STORING

The ideal way to harvest quinces is to leave them on the trees for as long as possible, but to remove them before the first frost. If the fruit is frosted it will not keep so well. As with most tree fruit, quinces are ready to pick if they come away when gently twisted. The beauty of the ripening process is that it is naturally staggered and you will be able to harvest throughout the autumn.

Be very careful when collecting the fruit as it spoils much more easily than you would expect. Dropping them carelessly into a basket will almost certainly cause bruising and make the fruit more likely to rot. For the same reason windfalls need to be used immediately.

Quinces will keep for a couple of months if unblemished. Put them on trays and store in a cool, airy place; a garden shed is ideal if you have one. Lay the fruits so they do not touch one another, this way it won't matter if one starts to rot. You can simply remove the damaged fruit and the surrounding fruit will be unaffected. You can buy attractive trays which will stack neatly, but just as good are the simple slatted trays you will find for virtually nothing at most markets. In the Middle Ages it was common to lay the quinces on a bed of ashes from the hearth to protect them and in the nineteenth century quinces were stored in trays lined with poplar or pine sawdust. Any of these would have kept the fruit dry and cushioned, but they aren't really necessary.

Stored quinces can give off a heady aroma which will be a blessing or a curse, according to your attitude. Mrs Beeton in her *Household Management* was clearly not impressed: 'This fruit has the remarkable peculiarity of exhaling an agreeable odour, taken singly, but when in any quantity, or when they are stowed away in a drawer or close room, the pleasant aroma becomes an intolerable stench, although the fruit

may be perfectly sound; it is therefore desirable that, as but a few quinces are required for keeping, they should be kept in a high and dry loft, and out of the way of the rooms used by the family.' Many Victorian household manuals suggest storing quinces in flat trays at the top of the linen cupboard where they will scent your laundry. The point to be wary of is that they will scent any other fruit stored with them. Apples and pears mix well with quinces in cooking but you do not want them smelling of quinces at the start if you want to use them in separate dishes. Do not be tempted to store the quinces in plastic bags. The fruit will appear fine, but will tend to discolour on the inside. Quinces can also be preserved in jars, cooked or frozen and this is covered in the next chapter.

WHICH QUINCE TO PLANT?

Most quinces grow to a roughly similar size and shape and their fruit is often indistinguishable. Fruit specialists such as Brogdale at Faversham in Kent or the National Collection at Norton Priory in Cheshire each have around twenty cultivars, but in reality your choice may be restricted to the few stocked in most nurseries. If you do want a particular cultivar you will need to contact Brogdale or one of the specialist nurseries listed in *The Plant Finder.* This is an incredibly useful annual book which tells you exactly which nurseries stock which plants. Strictly speaking, the different quinces are cultivars, rather than varieties, but you may find them referred to as varieties by some nurseries and catalogues.

Much is often made of new cultivars which will ripen in Britain sufficiently so that one can eat the fruit straight from the tree. After an exceptionally long, hot summer this may be possible, but we rather feel this misses the point of quinces. You can eat apples, pears and many other fruits straight from the tree, quinces are the only fruits which will release such a wonderful flavour when cooked.

Below is a selection of the main cultivars available in Britain, with any particular characteristics or points of interest. Where it is not mentioned you can assume that the plant has smallish blossom and crops averagely well. The most widely available ones are described first.

Cydonia oblonga 'Vranja' Nenadovik (RHS Award of Garden Merit)

This is one of the most commonly found cultivars and is deservedly popular, being the only one with a coveted Award of Garden Merit. It originates from Vranje in south Serbia and was introduced into Britain in the 1920s. The buds are a stripey barber's pole pink and white and the blossom is sweetly scented. The fragrant pale green fruit ripens to a rich golden yellow. This will grow into a fairly upright tree, but can be fan trained if you start when the plant is young. It is the quince most resistant to blight.

C. o. 'Leskovac'

This is one of the hardiest cultivars and crops well, with large apple shaped fruits. On dwarfing rootstock it grows into a neat shape and is perfect for small gardens and growing in containers.

C. o. 'Lusitanica' syn. 'Portugal'

This cultivar was brought to England by John Tradescant in 1611, when it was described as the best quince for baking. This is a vigorous tree but can be slow to crop. It is not particularly hardy and needs to be grown in a sheltered spot. Given the right conditions it is an excellent choice, being very disease resistant, second only to 'Vranja'. The blossom is large and a beautiful pale rose colour. This is followed by largish (100 mm/4 inches), fragrant, pear-shaped fruits. These turn a deep orangey-yellow and are covered with a thick woolly down. The flesh is tender and juicy and is still regarded by many as the best for all types of cooking. You need to provide a regular supply of water otherwise the fruit has a tendency to split.

C. o. 'Meech's Prolific'

This cultivar was raised in 1850 in America by the Rev. W. W. Meech. It fruited better that the already popular 'Orange', giving rise to its name; prolific. It has big flowers and large pear-shaped fruits which can reach 150 mm (6 inches) long. The fruits tend to ripen early and have an excellent flavour. The tree will also bear fruit early, often after only three years.

C. o. 'Agvambari'

C. o. 'Aromatnaya'

C. o. 'Bereczki'

This cultivar is Serbian in origin and is called after the Hungarian pomologist Bereczki. It is a very good cropper, with large fruits and is one of the best varieties for fan training.

C. o. 'Champion'

This nineteenth-century American cultivar is very productive, with large roundish fruits, which are mildly flavoured and ripen towards the end of the season. The blossom has pretty stripey buds which open into pale pink flowers. The tree will bear fruit when young, but is susceptible to blight.

C. o. 'Early Prolific'

C. o. 'Ekmek'

C. o. 'Iranian Quince'

This cultivar, fairly obviously, comes from Iran. The fruit is sweeter and less gritty than many of the other varieties and it keeps its shape well when cooked.

C. o. 'Isfahan'

This cultivar comes from Iran and is romantically named after the ancient city of Isfahan.

C. o. 'Ivan'

This is a recent introduction from Russia which ripens early. It is said to be possible to eat the fruit straight from the tree after a warm summer.

C. o. 'Krymsk'

Another recent cultivar from Russia, reputed to ripen fully in Britain

after good summers.

C. o. 'Maliformis'

This cultivar has apple shaped fruits with a fine flavour. It is very productive and the fruit ripens well in colder areas.

C. o. 'Pear-Shaped'

C. o. 'Rea's Mammoth'

C. o. 'Seibosa'

C. o. 'Serbian Gold'

C. o. 'Shams'

The fruit on this cultivar from Iran is particularly sweet and less gritty than many others.

C. o. 'Smyrna'

C. o. 'Sobu'

This is a large cultivar from Turkey which crops reliably; unfortunately the pear-shaped fruit can lack flavour.