



credit Jo Henchy

Winter is showing signs of abating, some early bulbs are pushing through the cold, damp soil, a few hardier bescarved and behatted souls are returning to the allotment, and I have done a winter newsletter...

This issue contains a quick run-down of pre-bud-burst activities for the orchard, a bit about formative pruning, a DNA dissection and related article about naming a new or renaming an old unknown variety. P+D corner grapples with the Asian hornet and fake news. The final article concerns the folly of over-management: it can be hard work keeping even a small garden tidy, so put your feet up and read about a good reason not to.

Winter tasks

Winter in the orchard is an unusually active period for gardening. It's unfortunate that many people ignore their gardens during the glum winter months as this is an ideal time to dig out unwanted perennial weeds and check your plants over without foliage getting in the way.

Planting trees

Plant trees and shrubs in the winter. The tiny absorbent root hairs are only present in the summer and shouldn't be disturbed, so winter planting allows them to be transported bare-root and get settled in ready for spring. Select a rootstock suitable for your soil conditions.

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Collecting scionwood

Scions for bench-grafting new trees must be taken when trees are dormant. They will store for a couple of months sealed in a plastic bag in a fridge with a moist folded kitchen towel or pad of cotton wool.

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Bench grafting

Whip and tongue or cleft grafting is ideally done around February when both scion and receiving rootstock are dormant but the sap will soon be rising to start healing the graft. The scions must be completely dormant but the stock can be active if the grafting is left a bit late.

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Formative prune

Young trees need to be shaped into their desired final form in the winter. This promotes new growth in the summer.

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Restorative pruning

If a tree has been neglected for a few years, or many, it will need a heavier prune than normal.

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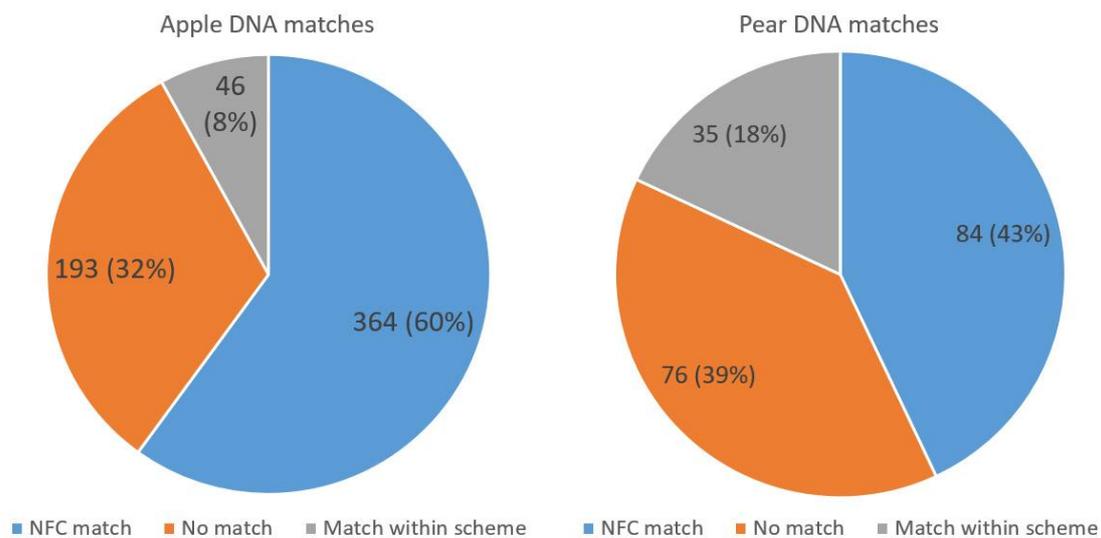
Protection from frosts

If it is quite mild, plums, damsons and peaches can start to flower at the end of January. If a strong frost is forecast, throw a bit of fleece, bedsheet, or hessian (anything but plastic) over the blooms for the night. Even if you can only cover a section, at least a part will still have a chance to fruit.

DNA dissection

Variety nomenclature is a subject I have covered before and suffice to say, it is confused. There's only so much certainty the experts can guarantee when identifying and there is often doubt. DNA profiling is no silver bullet, but it is going a long way to clearing up synonymy, uniqueness, and various confusions. The quondam Government research centre EMRC, now a private concern called East Malling Research, are the go-to organisations for DNA profiling. A national DNA profiling initiative led by Peter Laws and Bob Lever of FruitID.com has resolved a raft of confused nomenclature.

Some of the fruit sent in are known varieties but with a local name (in blue), some is unique and unknown elsewhere (orange), and a few interesting ones pop up at different ends of the country with different names or none. Many varieties have been lost over the years, but it appears in some cases all they've really lost is their name.



Above - Apple and pear DNA samples compared to varieties held in the National Fruit Collection.

The limit of DNA is that many varieties develop genetic drift, known as ‘sports’, which have the same DNA profile. These are often subtle but useful differences, like a more coloured fruit, later flowering day or earlier ripening, but they can sometimes produce a fruit that looks and tastes quite different, such as a russet version.

Appellation

Once we know a variety is unique, we may want to name or rename it. New commercial varieties like Jazz, RubyFrost, SweeTango, Honeydew and Pink Lady are named after much deliberation by business consultants and committees. In the UK the Japanese apple Mutsu is marketed as Crispin, the German Alkmene as Early Windsor, Fiesta is now sold as Red Pippin and, in a perfect example of why renaming is so common, following WWII a fenland farmer was having trouble shifting a large crop of Bismarck apples, so he ‘rebranded’ them as the far more patriotic ‘Duchess of Kent’. Bismarck trees under this name still occasionally turn up!

However, for our part we can call our new pippins or unknown old veterans whatever takes our fancy. A young tree producing a tasty eater found growing on an MOD training ground in Staffs recently has been christened Whittington Hero, and an old

tree that presumably grew from a seedling on a beach in Suffolk is known by locals as Thorpeness, has been propagated and sold as Aldeburgh Beach Apple, and has even reached minor fame nationally as Roger Deakin's Apple since it featured in his *Wild Wood* book (it is notable in that the beach conditions have naturally pruned it to a twelve metre wide three foot high bush – [read more about it in the Orchard East project newsletter here](#)).



Above - The salty sea wind has pruned 'Thorpeness' into a low bush (photo credit Paul Read).



**Right - Visible from space (sort of)
© Google**

As this last example shows, we should ideally be aiming for some sort of consensus to avoid future confusion. So, unto the breach steps Peter Laws with a new semi-official naming process called the Register of Local Cultivars (RLC). This process sets out a model whereby any new or unknown cultivar can be DNA profiled then unequivocally described, given an approved unique name vetted against previous use, and safely propagated onwards. If an unknown old variety is later identified the new name can be relegated to a synonym. Read more details and download a registration form at www.fruitid.com (click 'help' at the top left and see the last menu item under 'general').

P&D Corner

A new threat is emerging from Asia. It has the potential to kill millions and the fallout would be ruinous to crops. But this is not a well-armed dictator with a bad hair-do, it is the Asian hornet *Vespa velutina*, and it kills bees and other pollinators. However, similar to that other threat to world peace, let's get some perspective.

We do need to be vigilant as this species is causing problems in France where it is thought to have arrived in a shipment of china from China. It has already been recorded in Blighty and the threat to our bee colonies is real. In Asia, honey bees can swarm around an attacking hornet until it overheats and dies, but it is thought that even if European bees employ this tactic the ambient temperature is too low for the strategy to succeed. If you see one, report it to Defra immediately.



Above - The Asian hornet is distinctive in that only the fourth segment of the abdomen is yellow, the first three are black and the last, with the stinger, is darker tinged. It has yellow legs, not reddish, and lacks any red pigment on head and thorax.

When researching this article I found so much misinformation on the internet that your average punter doesn't stand a chance. There are images of our native and much persecuted European hornet *Vespa crabro* in The Sun, the Daily Mail, and The Telegraph mislabelled as Asian Hornets. The damage this could do to our native (and really quite impressive) hornet is obvious. The Express gets the pictures right but shows a video of the Asian giant hornet *Vespa mandarinia*, and The Mirror also

conflates the two in the same story. The Daily Mail reports on a 'terrified family' fleeing a 'killer Asian HORNET', which it is clear from the images is a European hornet, and they often run wildly sensational stories (keywords: millions, swarms, vicious, killer, mutilate, ransack, two-inches long and so on).

Here's a few sober facts to still your beating heart:

- *Vespa velutina* the Asian hornet, aka yellow legged hornet, is actually smaller than our native hornet.
- It is no more of a threat to humans than our native species. Any deaths are due to anaphylactic responses, as with bees, wasps, peanuts etc.
- So far, only one nest has been found in Gloucestershire and is thought to have been contained.

Some good news was released in January that a pheromone has been isolated that can attract males, so disrupting the mating cycle and alerting us to their presence. Although not yet publicly available this could prove to be our salvation. World peace is restored... I wonder if there's a Kim Jong-un pheromone?

How to neglect an orchard properly

We need to talk about that thicket in the corner of the orchard. Truth be told, I spend far less time with my fruit trees than I'd like. I barely said a word to some of them all last year. The unhappy truth is that it has to be expected that occasionally we must do things other than look after our orchards, fruit trees and allotments, so it with this in mind that I tell you – everything is going to be OK! Underbrush, scrub, thicket, secondary woodland – call it what you will – benign neglect is generally a good thing. There are few species that appreciate a bowling green as much as *Homo sapiens*. We think this is so important we've devoted an [entire webpage](#) to sward management.

Right - Alternate long and short grass strips allow annuals and perennials to flower and set seed.



Allowing areas of scrubby undergrowth to develop will provide shelter, food and forage for a wide range of species. Bramble and nettle are quick to colonise unkempt areas and thrive even in the shade of trees. I have to admit though, they do send the bowls all over the shop. Regular mowing, grazing or trampling will get rid of them when you need to, but they are among the most biodiverse plants in the UK. Nettles are the main foodplant for at least five butterfly larvae, and blackberries are a sugar-rich foodsource for probably hundreds of species from tiny fruit flies to dormice, wood mice, birds and of course, us. More prey diversity means more predators coming to dine out in your orchard. Invertebrates and small mammals will attract other species such as bats and birds of prey, and this will in turn benefit your trees by decreasing pests and diseases and ultimately increasing harvests.

Once you have a small area of thicket, the next thing to bear in mind is that after a few years it will start to be colonised by opportunistic trees like elder, sycamore, ash, silver birch and even the occasional oak, and the brambles will eventually swamp any

nearby trees, so every few years the area needs to be cleared back and a new one allowed to develop in another patch.

May the fruits be with you

Steve Oram

Orchard Biodiversity Officer
