



Dan's wonderful world of apples

Veteran grower Dan Neuteboom survived the War thanks to food grown in his garden. Apple Day may be cancelled Suffolk's favourite fruit will always be the apple of his eye...

WORDS AND PICTURES: Marion Welham

This month is the 30th anniversary of the annual Apple Day but Dan Neuteboom has spent double that time growing apples.

From the deep veranda of his home in the heart of the Braiseworth orchards near Eye, Dan gives me his take on reviving rare or heritage varieties and shares the story of a friend who was growing what she described as an “interesting” pear. He told her: “You may say, after three years, yes it is interesting but it doesn’t have any fruit!”

Since retiring from commercial growing, Dan has been trying out varieties of apples and pears with a focus on the health and welfare of the older trees which he says can often be undervalued. Having formerly introduced such successful varieties as Suffolk Pink and Winter Wonder, he knows what to look for in a decent apple.

The start of Dan’s horticultural journey from the age of eight or nine was a hard one. Growing up in the Dutch village of Strijen in the island of Hoeksche Waard, he recalls the German invasion when they smashed the dykes so that salt water poured into food-growing areas.

“My father was a GP and had lots of patients on the point of starvation,” he says. “During the war, we literally survived on whatever the garden produced. When I came home from school, my mother told me to go out and collect apples from our three trees in the garden. She would slice them and hang them to dry in the airing cupboard.”

Even the family pig ate the apples, says Dan. It was at this young age that he learned the value of organic matter for growing fruit. His mother, a farmer’s daughter, instructed him



LEFT:
Dan and Henrietta Neuteboom love the outdoor life

ABOVE:
Ready to eat: freshly picked apples at Braiseworth

BELOW:
Winter Wonder introduced in Suffolk by Dan Neuteboom

to collect chicken manure to put under the apple trees. And many of his relatives were growers with glasshouses, “so I really felt that growing things was the real life.”

Emerging from university with a degree in specialist fruit growing, he found a place in the UK at Studley Horticultural & Agricultural College.

“What a wonderful surprise it was,” an amused Dan recalls. “It turned out to be a girls’ college and (his wife) Henrietta was one of the students, so I married her and here we are living happily together, both really keen horticulturalists, for the last half century.”

Henrietta has created an idyllic garden and the wildflower meadow so crucial to the orchard fruit with its natural pollinators and predators keeping chemical control of aphids to a minimum.

The couple sold their commercial fruit-growing company, Hemingstone Fruit Farms, in 2002. The Braiseworth operation is now owned jointly by daughter Kathy and her partner, Jeremy, who are replanting and renewing the orchards as well as allowing wild flowers to flourish.

As we sip the delicious apple juice from ‘Winter Wonder’, the variety introduced by Dan in the late 1970s, he draws attention to the sturdy oak trees nearby.

“Every morning at breakfast we look at the oaks and say, there’s 300 years of growth there! That tells you something about the soil, the most beautiful loam over clay. And for growing healthy fruit trees, you have to keep the soil alive with fungi, nematodes, insects everything. When the soil is open with oxygen the roots can get right down.”

In retirement, Dan has been fascinated by what older trees can achieve in producing good quality fruit providing they receive the proper care. He takes pride in showing me a row of fruit trees planted 55 years ago.

“Provided the size of such trees is gradually reduced, the soil well drained and the fruit thinned out at a very early stage, it is remarkable how well they respond.” He even likens this to



Suffolk’s best apples

Red Pippin – self-fertile, good for limited space

Greensleeves – ripens at the end of August

Howgate Wonder – long-keeping, dual purpose

James Grieve – reliable cropping

Suntan – aromatic dessert apple, requires space and two pollinators

Suffolk Pink – crisp and tasty

Winter Wonder – crisp and aromatic

his own ageing process – he’s in his eighties – admitting that “working with older trees on a regular basis generates a feeling of mutual respect and loyalty”. The knarled trunks of older trees are especially valued in a garden setting, he says.

He reckons it takes a lifetime to find out the characteristics of trees. “We are all different and with apple varieties it’s exactly the same. When I go summer pruning, I walk past the trees first to see what they are telling me in, for example, the way they hold the shoots, the amount of new growth or the bearing of the fruit.” Decades of experience has given Dan the edge when selecting trees and choosing apples from some 6,000 varieties.

Local Suffolk apples such as Lady Henniker, Sturmer Pippin and St Edmund’s Pippin may be historically interesting but Dan is underwhelmed. “If you plant an apple tree, it’s important to know if you will get good tasting fruit and regular cropping,” he says.

For gardeners with limited space, his choice is the self-fertile Red Pippin, introduced as the Spanish-sounding Fiesta in 1987 at East Malling Research Station.

“It’s so suitable for the English climate and never lets you down. It is crisp, good to eat and has a certain keeping quality,” says Dan. He also recommends Greensleeves which ripens at the end of August, and Howgate Wonder, a long-keeping dual purpose apple.

“James Grieve is another I would plant because it always crops. In mid-August it’s completely green and slightly acidic – an early cooker before the Bramleys come - but if you wait three weeks, it’s a sweet apple.”



‘We are all different and with apple varieties it is just the same’

ABOVE:
Dan Neuteboom’s heavily cropping older trees

BELOW:
Greensleeves: at its best in October.

If space is not an issue, Dan’s number one choice is the intensely aromatic dessert apple Suntan but it takes at least two or three years to crop and requires two pollinators, so has not been readily taken up by growers.

Some of the best apples have been discovered by chance. Suffolk Pink came about in the 1980s when Dan ordered a batch of Greensleeves from the late Jack Matthews of Thurston who introduced the well-known Discovery variety.

“I noticed one of the trees looked a bit odd,” says Dan. “But I planted it and it produced the most fantastic apple, so crisp and

tasty.” Now Waitrose is the sole supplier of Suffolk Pink and 20 per cent of Braiseworth orchards is devoted to it.

Dan is a regular at farmers’ markets in Beccles and Rickinghall. “When we started in 1960, there were over 300 fruit growers in Suffolk and now there are barely 30 left,” says Dan. But he believes that, with replanting and renewal, the Braiseworth orchards have a bright future.

In the meantime, he is more than happy to continue his research on fruit growing and share it with others on his remarkable website that includes video tutorials and compelling stories of Suffolk apple growers.

“I did this for the benefit of every gardener enabling them to grow their own fruit trees with success and satisfaction.” ♦

Find out more at realenglishfruit.co.uk



Classic baked apples

- 6 eating apples (score around the circumference of each with a small, sharp knife)
- handful of sultanas
- 2 tbsp light muscovado sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 30g butter
- 2 tsp demerara sugar

- Heat the oven to 200°C/180°C fan/ gas 6.
- Remove the centre of each apple with an apple corer. Mix the sultanas, muscovado sugar and cinnamon together in a bowl. Stand the apples, side by side, in a baking dish and, using

- all the sultana mix, push some into each apple’s cavity. Add a blob of butter to the top of each and sprinkle over the demerara sugar. Bake in the oven for 20 mins or until the apples are cooked through. Delicious with vanilla ice cream.