Rare Quince Fruit Making A Comeback

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

If you are looking for something unusual to grow in your orchard, consider quince, says Tremaine Arkley. He and his wife Gail have grown the ancient fruit from Turkey and Central Asia for about nine years in their Independence, Ore., orchard. With about 220 trees, they are the largest growers in the area, and market mostly to chefs and distilleries.

"It does well here because we don't need to irrigate, and they are sweeter because it grows in a favorable climate," Arkley says. "You can pretty much grow quince in any temperate climate. If you can grow apple trees and they don't freeze, you may be able to grow quince."

There are only about 200 acres of quince trees in the U.S., most of them in California's irrigated Central Valley. Quince arrived in the U.S. around 1720 and was once common on many farmsteads into the 19th century because of its high pectin content used for making jams and jellies, before pectin was sold commercially. Because the fruit must be cooked to eat, quince became less common, but has attracted interest in recent years.

"Many chefs cook and mash it up and use it as a thickening agent. They also make a quince paste (membrillo) served with cheese as an appetizer and bake quince halves and stuff them with lamb," Arkley explains. Distillers who make brandy distilled with fruit (eau de vie) are also interested in quince, as are apple cider makers.

Growing quince trees is much like growing other fruit trees. In the Northwest, nurseries offer about eight varieties. The Arkleys grow Portugal Quince from bareroot stock, and Arkley also grafts trees. Trees start bearing fruit in the third or fourth year. When in full production each tree can produce 200 to 300 lbs. of fruit a year.

"We sell it to wholesalers or restaurants just before it is dead ripe," Arkley says. "The problem with selling it retail is that it always looks bruised, and it turns people off – unless customers are aware that's what quince does."

Because it bruises so easily, the Arkleys carefully handpick the fruit for 4 to 6 weeks starting in early September and sell it for $1.50/lb. wholesale and $2/lb. retail. If harvested before it is totally ripe, quince can be stored.

Besides the labor-intensive harvesting, marketing can be a challenge.

Photo courtesy David Karp

Tremaine Arkley and his wife Gail have grown quince for about 9 years in their Oregon orchard. The fruit must be cooked to eat so they market mostly to chefs and distilleries.

"It's an unappreciated fruit and not very well known," he says, though it has nutritional benefits and makes tasty jams and jellies.

Still, it's an interesting fruit for hobby orchardists to grow, and there may be marketing opportunities locally.

Arkley notes that there are also pink flowering quince trees that don't produce an edible fruit. Edible quince trees have big white blossoms in the spring. For more information on varieties, he suggests checking out the catalog at www.onegreenworld.com.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Tremaine and Gail Arkley, Oregon Quinces, 9775 Hultman Rd., Independence, Ore. 97351 (ph 503 838-4886; www.oregonquinces.com).

He Turns Weeds Into Wine

Raphael Lyon turns dandelions into wine, purchasing blossoms by the bag from pickers who harvest them on their own farms. He pays extra for high quality, including blossoms that are fast-frozen in airtight bags.

"Dandelions go to seed fast, sometimes lasting less than a day," says Lyon.

Lyon says that a bottle of dandelion wine has the equivalent of half a bottle of compacted dandelions in it. It also has local honey. In addition to dandelions, he also makes wine from other local plants including apples, rose hips, juniper berries, blueberries, herbs and more. Of them all, dandelions are likely the most difficult to secure.

"With dandelions, you have to be there at the right moment," says Lyon. "The mass of them do their thing for about 10 days. Your field can be a week behind your neighbor's. My foragers have to be ready to drop everything and pick."

Lyon prefers to work with local farmers and residents around the Clintondale, N.Y., farmstead where he operates the state's smallest legal winery. He notes that the winery could grow substantially if he could collect enough dandelions.

"I used about 100 lbs. of flower heads last year, but I could have used 10 times that many," says Lyon.

He started making wine from wild grapes in 2000 and has been making esoteric wines ever since. "I got into mead, which is made using honey with fruit and plants that didn't have their own sugar," explains Lyons.

He set a goal of making top of the line wines that can go on the shelf next to the finest wines of the world. He seems to have succeeded. He and his partner Arley Marks are developing a restaurant and bar in Brooklyn, N.Y., with the bar run by Marks. Lyon hopes it will serve in part as a "tasting room" for his wines. It will also be a meadery, where he can supplement on-farm production.

Raphael Lyon turns dandelions into wine, purchasing blossoms from pickers who harvest the dandelions on their own farms.

His current output runs around 1,500 gal. per year, though he hopes to scale up. Doing so will require using more farmed ingredients, acknowledges Lyon, and that may include farmed dandelions.

"I do a lot of foraging of whatever is in season. However, it's one thing to get enough for your family or yourself," says Lyon. "If you're in commercial production, you have to think long and hard about what is realistic to do by foraging."

While he can't make health claims on a label, Lyon points out that historically dandelion wine was used as a tonic against scurvy.

"Dandelions are an incredible source of vitamins and nutrients, in particular, vitamin C and iron," he says. "Dandelion wine was a way to preserve those nutrients for medicinal purposes."

A 2-pack of 12 1/2-oz. bottles of Memento Mori Dandelion Wine lists for $60.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Enlightenment Wines, 99 Scott Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217 (ph 347 843-3159; www.enlightenmentwines.com; Raphael@enlightenmentwines.com).

Mark Sudbrink uses Babydoll sheep to keep the grass short and prevent diseases in his Wisconsin apple orchard.

Apple Trees Thrive Alongside Babydoll Sheep

Sheep grazing in orchards is an old idea that Mark Sudbrink would like to see revived. He's been using Babydoll sheep to keep the grass short and prevent diseases in his Wisconsin apple orchard since 1992 with great success.

"The Olde English Babydoll Southdown sheep were bred centuries ago for orchards and vineyards, by eliminating the browsers and breeding the grazers," he explains. That changed with the introduction of herbicides, and sheep breeders weren't as concerned with breeding out browsers that chew on trees and brush.

Sudbrink has proactively bred his flock of 100 for grazing traits, and has sheep in his orchards with 2,000 trees year round.

"I keep some sheep in there all the time to keep the grass as short as I can to prevent diseases in the apple trees," he says. "We only pick apples off the trees, never off the ground." The sheep keep them cleaned up.

Because of their breeding and small size, Babydoll sheep are ideal, but Sudbrink takes precautions for those that might browse on the trees. Most trees are protected with tree wrap. Newly planted trees are surrounded by blue 55-gal. barrels that Sudbrink cuts the bottom out of.

"It's win/win," he says. "The sheep keep the orchard clean, plus we have wool in the springtime. They also fertilize and we sell the meat."

The meat is excellent, and Sudbrink thinks apples may be part of the good flavor. He's also been told that apple seeds have a natural wormer. That makes sense because he uses very little commercial wormer on his flock.

Thanks to the sheep he only sprays a dormant oil spray when the fruit is very small and spot sprays when necessary.

"People who buy apples from us like to see the Babydolls because they're short and cute with a Teddy bear face," Sudbrink says. He notes he sells ewes for $250 to $300 and buck lambs if anyone is interested in starting a flock for their orchard.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Mark Sudbrink, E19252 Scenic Dr., Fall Creek, Wis. 54742 (ph 715 877-3222).