



Find out more about the merry potential of the medlar tree and INSET how to use its fruit



How to grow mighty and marvellous medlar trees

Barbara Segall used to grow her own medlars, now she relies on the kindness of friends with medlar trees to get her annual round of medlarking* going!

I have long been on a mission to grow fruit, vegetables and herbs that are both productive and ornamental, so I seek out the unusual as well as the regular suspects and the medlar fits well into the 'productive, ornamental and unusual' category. Like quince and mulberry, medlars are rarely sold in supermarkets and hard to obtain.

I planted a medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) in my last garden where there was space for it to grow into its rather wayward canopy



Above: Barbara explains how to know when fruits are ripe and ready to eat



Medlar makes delicious jelly

More about the National Collection of Medlars

Jane Steward has an orchard of some 115 trees from which she harvests the fruit that she needs to make jelly and chutney and other medlar produce. In her drive to revive the medlar she hopes to encourage people to visit the orchard and see the medlars in their various seasonal stages.

The National Collection of Medlars (<https://www.plantheritage.org.uk/national-plant-collections/search-the-national-plant-collections/collection/5459/mespilus-germanica-cvs>) is open by arrangement for groups of up to 20. E-mail Jane Steward at janesteward@eastgatelarder.co.uk



Jane harvests some of the fruit from her National Collection of trees

and it rewarded me with wide, open-faced white, rose-like spring flowers, zingy autumn foliage (actually among the last leaves to drop in December and the first fruit tree foliage in spring). It had burnished golden fruit, which I mostly enjoyed on the tree, as if they were winter tree ornaments.

Medlars are in the rose (Rosaceae) family and so are closely related to apples, pears and quince.

At that time, in the 1980s, I didn't really know what to do with the bullet-hard fruit that people told me could be made into a delicious fruit jelly. I tried and tried but it wasn't until recently when I met Jane Steward of Eastgate Larder and holder of the Plant Heritage National Collection of Medlars that I learned how to use this old, largely forgotten fruit. I learned from Jane that the key is to give the medlar time to ripen and to observe it closely as it changes seasonally, from flower to fruit.

The epitome of slow food

Jane has devoted land, time and energy to the medlar and is single-handedly responsible for ensuring that it is set fair for

a revival. She describes it as the 'epitome of slow food' and is attentive to every seasonal stage of the trees in her orchard, learning the right moment for harvesting from close scrutiny in autumn. Jane is particularly fond of the 'quirky, almost contorted' shape that medlar trees develop as they mature. They need little formative pruning, only sensitive removal of dead or rubbing branches.

I don't have a tree now (although I am seriously considering a patio medlar) but each year I have been given medlar fruit by friends who have trees. I put these hard, brown fruits on a tray in a cool dry place and wait and watch as they slowly ripen. The fruits are round, with a wide and deep dip in the middle where the flowers were once attached. At first they are hard and inedible, but once fully ripe or 'bletted', they can be eaten fresh.

If you haven't eaten a fresh, ripe medlar... do! The skin can be peeled away like that of a fig, or you can just dive in with a teaspoon and scoop out the soft brown flesh. You need to discard the five large woody pips. The taste of the now soft and juicy flesh is like a mix of apples and citrus, almost like an apple crumble without the crumble. Fresh medlars are delicious eaten with cheese or charcuterie. And there are also health benefits from this largely forgotten or abandoned fruit, which is high in antioxidants and Vitamins B and C and relatively low in carbohydrates, including fructose, glucose and sorbitol.

Using medlars

Apart from eating them fresh, once bletted they can be transformed into jelly or chutney as well as syrup. Jane Steward's book *Medlars, Growing and Cooking* offers a selection of recipes for sweet and savoury dishes as well as for use in making steeped alcoholic drinks. If you are making jelly, Jane advises using a third of unbletted medlars in the pan, as they are higher in pectin than fully bletted fruits. Pectin will be needed for the jelly to set and using natural pectin seems a good plan.



From spring flowers through to autumn fruits and a winter display

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Medlar fruits being stored for 'bletting'

Five fascinating things about medlars

1 Bletting

The fruit is ready to be eaten fresh, processed to make jelly and chutney, or frozen for later use, when it has 'bletted'. This wonderful word comes from a French word 'bletir', meaning ripe or even overripe. In autumn when the fruit starts falling from the tree you can be sure the time to harvest is not far off. Once you see that the skin texture and colour is changing, that is the time to pick all the fruit (rather than let it fall and go to waste) and store it in a cool place for bletting to occur. Once the skin fully

darkens and softens it is ready for use.

As Jane Steward is using her fruit harvest to make a commercial product, she needs to harvest just at the right moment. Then she stores the fruit in stackable plastic boxes in a dry, well-ventilated shed. After a few weeks they will have ripened fully for the next stage. Then she freezes them and in spring begins the production of jelly and chutney.

2 Choosing a tree

Medlars are grown on quince or hawthorn stock. You can choose from a half standard, a standard or even a multi-stem

tree and it is best to buy them bare-rooted ready for autumn planting. If you want to make jelly and chutney, choose the variety 'Nottingham' as it is a reliable fruit-bearing tree. 'Royal', 'Flanders Giant' and 'Large Dutch' or 'Dutch', are also good choices.

Jane introduced me to the Iranian medlar, whose fruit will ripen on the branch and you can pick and eat it straight from the tree. It can also be frozen and is delicious once fully defrosted. This variety was introduced by Keepers Nursery in Kent and it originates from wild medlars in northern Iran

If you don't have enough garden space there is Sibley's Patio Medlar, developed by fruit specialist Will Sibley (available from Pomona Fruits). He has used a naturally compact medlar, 'Westerveld', grafted onto a dwarfing rootstock to produce a tree sold in a 4.5L container.

3 Planting

Medlars are self-fertile and usually swift into cropping, often around three years, after planting. They do best in a sunny site on free-draining, slightly acid soil, but they will also cope with some shade. They don't do well in windy sites and coastal situations. The flowers appear in late spring usually after the last frosts and, being so large, are high-viz bee-attractors. Jane describes them as 'bee-landing pads'.

Jane is particularly fond of the 'quirky, almost contorted' shape that medlar trees develop as they mature. In general once you are happy with their height and shape they need little pruning. Branches can get congested at the centre so sensitive removal of some is needed to keep the centre open, but leave as many small side branches as possible, since medlars are tip-bearers, with single fruits on each fruiting stem, rather than clusters of fruit.



Above: A very old medlar in Lewes, East Sussex



Medlars are the last to ripen of all the tree fruits

‘If you haven’t eaten a fresh, ripe medlar... do! The skin can be peeled away like that of a fig, or you can just dive in with a teaspoon and scoop out the soft brown flesh.’

4 Where do they come from?

Medlars originate from the Mediterranean, somewhere between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. Probably first used as a domestic fruit some 3,000 years ago, they have made their way to our gardens and tables via the Greeks and then the Romans during waves of exploration and settlement. In the Middle Ages, medlars

were very popular in European gardens and kitchens, as the fruit was among the last to ripen of all the tree fruits, providing food and preserves in the winter months. Although in many parts of Europe it has largely disappeared from cultivation, it is still important in many parts of Central Europe and Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan as a commercial fruit.

5 A bad press

For centuries the medlar suffered from rather off-putting names because of its strange appearance, with an open calyx where the flowers and stamens once were. Its lack of popularity also has something to do with the fact that it has to fully ripen or almost rot before it can be eaten. Shakespeare’s mentions of medlars in several plays including *As You Like It*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Measure for Measure* and *Timon of Athens* are less than flattering. He talks of rottenness before ripeness, a rotten medlar and ‘open-arse’. In Europe it had various nicknames and was referred to as ‘monkey’s bottom’ and ‘dog’s arse’ with ‘cul de chien’ being the French translation!



The delightful open flowers of a medlar tree



In Europe, the shape of medlars gave rise to several rather uncouth names!

Buying medlar trees in the UK

Keepers Nursery
www.keepers-nursery.co.uk

Frank P Matthews
www.frankpmatthews.com

Pomona Fruits
www.pomonafruits.co.uk

*Medlarking is a word that Barbara conjured up and that she and Jane Steward regularly use as a hashtag on social media to describe their medlar enthusiasm!