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### *Pyrus communis*

**PEAR** is a deciduous tree. Native to Europe and western Asia it has small white flowers. It is also known as *Amritaphala* (Sanskrit), *Armüt* (Arabic), *Berikaya* (Telugu), *Birnbaum* (German), *Birne* (German), Common pear, Cultivated pear, European pear, European wild pear, French pear, Garden pear, *Holzbirne* (German), *Hrušeň obecná* (Czech), *Kultur-Birne* (German), *Langasa* (Maltese), *Nakh* (Hindi), *Naspati* (Kashmiri), *Päärynäpuu* (Finnish), *Päron* (Swedish), *Päronträäd* (Swedish), *Peer* (Dutch), *Pera* (Spanish), *Pero* (Italian), *Perrikkay* (Tamil), *Pirujo* (Esperanto), *Poire* (French), *Poirier* (French), and Pyrrie; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of affection (blossom or fruit), comfort (tree), ‘do not forget’, heart (fruit), ‘not altogether lovely’ (blossom), and satire.

Warning – seeds consumed in excess are poisonous. The leaves are also suspected to be poisonous.

*Communis* means ‘common, general or growing with’.

The Sumerians were familiar with the pear tree and put the fruit to medicinal use. In their records which date back to about 2750 BC the pear was an ingredient in a prescription for a poultice. However these fruit seem to have been little known or little used at the eastern end of the Mediterranean by the ancient Egyptians or the Hebrews, although they were certainly familiar in what is now Turkey towards the end of the days of the Roman Empire. Those historians who have suggested that the ancient Greeks were not conversant with pears however seem to be a little confounded by a relatively detailed treatise on the cultivation of pears written by the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC). (There must also have been at least one variety of pear in Western Europe at the beginning of the Middle Stone Age. Archaeologists have found seeds of a small-fruited pear at the Swiss Lake villages at Robenhausen in the European Alps – and this site dates back to 8000 BC.)

Archaeologists have also found pear remains in a Chinese tomb dating back to 2100 BC. (Historians believe that it was the Chinese who introduced pear to northern India in 1 AD.) In China books used to be printed from wooden blocks made of pear or date (*Phoenix dactylifera*) wood.

Pears were popular with the Romans who are believed to be responsible for introducing the fruit tree to a large part of Europe. They not only ate the fruit raw, cooked or dried but also used them to make vinegar and an alcoholic drink. When the Roman statesman and orator, Cato the Elder (234-149 BC) was alive he wrote of 6 varieties which seem to have increased to 40 by the time his peer, the Roman natural historian, Pliny (23-79) had made a name for himself. The latter mentions that one variety particularly produced fruit weighing one Roman pound (about 9 oz.) and he like many other writers including the Roman scholar, Varro (116-27 BC) before him and his 1<sup>st</sup> Century contemporary, Columella the Roman agricultural writer, had his own pear recipes particularly for fermenting the fruit to make perry. By the end of the Roman Empire pear varieties are said to have jumped further in number to about 60.

In 13<sup>th</sup> Century England Henry III’s gardener is said to have grown several pear trees of a French variety that bore hard fruit popular there at that time. Various authorities suggest

however that it was 17<sup>th</sup> Century France that did more than most to develop the pear. (Although several pear stories are connected with Louis XI (1423-1483), who became king of France in 1461, far greater interest in the fruit seems to have emerged 200 years later.) At that time the Sun King, Louis XIV (1638-1715) was on the French throne and he appointed La Quintinie (1624-1691) a passionate gardener, who began life as a lawyer, as *Intendant général des jardins fruitiers et potagers de toutes les maisons royales*. The pears that La Quintinie grew at Auteuil after he gave up the legal profession had come to the attention of Le Nôtre (1613-1700), the king's landscape/architect gardener who created the gardens of Versailles from rubble. Under La Quintinie's direction Louis XIV's tables became loaded with fresh fruit and vegetables many of which were foreign and grown in France and for the first time successfully in Europe. During this period 300 different varieties of pear were known and, compared with fruit mentioned by Pliny 1500 years earlier, La Quintinie grew some that weighed in at 2.2 lb.

Pear seems to have been introduced at different points on the eastern seaboard of North America. Apparently French Jesuits introduced it to the St. Lawrence Valley in the north of the North American Continent (it would seem to the particular joy of the Iroquois North American Indians) – and from there it gradually spread south. Other introductions include those at the Massachusetts Bay Colony that received pear seeds in the 1630s. In 1647 a tree arrived in New Amsterdam (destined to become New York) from Holland. In 1705 French settlers were establishing pear orchards on the banks of the Detroit River – and it comes as little surprise to most historians to note that Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), 3rd President of the United States, grew the trees on his Virginia estate.

A variety of pear well-known today under several names is familiar in Britain as a 'Williams' (or 'Williams' Bon Chrétien' – or to the French, the 'Bon Chrétien' or to North Americans and Australians as a 'Bartlett'. The French name supports their implication that this variety came via St. Francis of Paola from Italy as a present to Louis XI who ruled France from 1461. A more authentic version of the legend suggests he brought four spices (not the fruit) and in any event the Williams pear can only be traced back as far as the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It is said to have been developed in 1796 in Britain. However the names do not celebrate the English schoolmaster at Aldermaston in the county of Berkshire, John Stair, who is actually supposed to have developed it in 1770 but the names of the ultimate British and American distributors respectively, a Mr. Williams (of a London nursery at Turnham Green) and a Mr. Enoch Bartlett (1779-1860), the latter a Massachusetts merchant who bought a pear orchard from a Captain Thomas Brewer who had imported these trees from England. Today the Williams is grown on a large scale in both North America and France. Not only are 23% of commercial French orchards given over to it but the fruit are also the basis of a French spirit called *Williamine*. In North America a vast quantity of the pears are destined for the canning industry.

There are now many more than the 300 varieties of pear of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century only a very few of which are chosen for commercial marketing today and are widely known. One variety that like the Williams has also withstood the test of time should perhaps be mentioned, the 'Conference' pear – one that is especially popular in Britain. Another is the 'Comice' or *Doyenné due Comice* which many describe as 'the queen of pears'.

For some the pear was also considered at one time to be able to provide strong protection against evil, while for others (especially in Ireland) it was believed that pear blossom brought inside presaged a family death. It is claimed that a variation of the latter was dramatically illustrated by the Scottish Coalstoun family. Sir George Broun married Lady Elizabeth M'Kenzie in 1699 and after the wedding his new wife innocently bit into the family's treasured heirloom, a pear that had allegedly protected the family fortune for 500

years. Shortly afterwards the Laird had to sell the estate (to his brother) and then he and his two sons were drowned in May 1703.

One traditional story in England in which there appears to be no basis in fact tells of how King John (1167-1216), of Magna Carta fame, suffered poisoning when he was entertained by the monks of Swinstead. He was served a dish of pears which contained an unknown ingredient – or was it peas (*Pisum sativum*), peaches (*Prunus persica*), lampreys or frog's blood in ale.

Some authorities familiar with the works of the famous English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) have remarked that his references to the pear are all disparaging. It is certainly evident in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *All's Well that Ends Well*. In the former Falstaff declares

..... I warrant, they would whip me with their fine wits, till I were as crest-fallen as a dried pear. ....

While in the latter Parolles is scathing in his response to Helena

..... Your date is better in your pie and your porridge than in your cheek; and your virginity, your old virginity, is like one of our French withered pears: it looks ill, it eats drily; marry, 't is a withered pear; it was formerly better; marry, yet, 't is a withered pear. ....

Some of the old English customs and sayings associated with the pear are related to specific varieties eg. the Choke-pear is reputed for its particularly astringent taste. This led in conversation to any unanswerable argument or acid retort being referred to as a 'choke pear'. Then the roots of one particular proverb that is associated with the pear tree and still heard today could arguably be traced back to the writings of the famous Roman orator, Cicero (106-43 BC).

Walnuts and pears you plant for your heirs.

The trees grow so slowly (although modern varieties fruit after a few years) that they will be enjoyed by somebody else.

The pinkish-brown wood was used to make mathematical instruments, rulers and drawing instruments. Pear wood is prized to for making furniture and musical instruments.

Medicinally, the fruit were believed to be able to act as an antidote for mushroom poisoning and it is said were often added to mushroom dishes as a precautionary measure to counter any poisonous fungi that had been included inadvertently. It was also believed that the water from a well sunk near an uncultivated pear tree could offer a cure for gout. Today herbalists turn to the pear in preference to any other fruit for diabetic patients as it has a relatively lower sugar content.

The tree is the birthday flower for 12<sup>th</sup> June.

The blossom is the birthday flower for 17<sup>th</sup> August.