



The Book of Pears: The Definitive History and Guide to Over 500 Varieties

Joan Morgan, with paintings by Elisabeth Dowle

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Ebury Press (October 2015)

ISBN-10: 1785031473

ISBN-13: 978-1785031472

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Book-Pears-Definitive-History-varieties/dp/1785031473>

Review by Holly H. Shimizu.

To be published in *The Independent Scholar* (2016, forthcoming).

In *The Book of Pears* Dr. Joan Morgan has provided a wonderfully detailed and scholarly account of the pear's rich history and its many varieties, with the help of funding provided by the David A. Karp Philanthropic Foundation and administered by NCIS. Joan Morgan is highly qualified to write such a book, being an eminent British pomologist and fruit historian whose honors include the prestigious Veitch Memorial Medal of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS); her extensive publications include *The Book of Apples*, *The New Book of Apples*, and *A Paradise Out of a Common Field: The Pleasures and Plenty of the Victoria Garden*. She is currently Chair of both the RHS Fruit Trials Forum and the RHS Fruit, Vegetable, and Herb Committee, and is also involved with the National Collection of Pears in Brogdale, Kent, England, part of an international program to protect plant genetic resources for the future.¹

The Book of Pears is lavishly illustrated with forty beautiful watercolor paintings by internationally respected botanic artist Elisabeth Dowle, who has been awarded seven Royal Horticultural Society Gold Medals, one of which was given for a selection of

paintings included in this book and another for those in *The Book of Apples*. Her paintings are exhibited and collected worldwide, held in many important institutions and selected for inclusion in the Florilegiums of Highgrove and the Royal Botanic Gardens.

The book begins with a history of food, focusing on fruit and orchards. The reader is taken on a journey through time to discover the multitude of uses, flavors, influences, and types, as well as the role of pears in garden design and horticulture. Although sometimes considered to be a poor relation of the apple, this book reveals that pears are in fact its worthy equals.

During her research for this book, Dr. Morgan traveled to Iran (the modern name for ancient Persia) to delve into the Middle Eastern history of pears. Pears were significant in early Persian gardens, and we learn that Persian carpets often depict pear trees as the Tree of Life. In early Persia the vision of paradise was an enclosed garden that was fragrant and fruitful, and the paradise garden valued pear trees for both their beauty as well as their utility.

Dr Morgan explains that our domestic pears stemmed from *Pyrus communis*, thought to be native to the northern Zagros Mountains, and that, as traders and explorers traveled the world, pears traveled with them. The trees themselves have been known to live up to 350 years, and since pears do not come true from seed and do not root easily from cuttings, they are often grafted to a rootstock as the best way to increase their numbers. As early as 424 BCE, ancient

¹ The pear gene bank is an important piece of heritage, collecting heirloom varieties which might otherwise disappear. In the United States, the USDA National Clonal Germplasm Repository, located in Corvallis, Oregon, also has a substantial pear collection. This American repository hosts an extensive collection of fruit and nut varieties which vary in terms of their ability to withstand cold, disease, and sub-optimal soil conditions.

Greek writings contain descriptions of the grafting of fruit trees as a means of replicating a specific variety.

Varieties of pears, each with distinct qualities, have been grown in different regions and countries over the years: for example the bergamot pear "Bergamotte," which has a distinctive aromatic taste, is thought to have come from the Ottoman Turks, and was recorded in Italy in 1532. Likewise, the Asian pear, in contrast with the European or western pear, does not require softening, but is known for being more firm and does not "melt" when eaten. Its history goes back to the ancient Silk Road between China and the Mediterranean where, along with other trade items and cultural exchanges, fruit trees were much prized.

Dr Morgan also explores the role of pears in health, and tells us that pears are described in some of the early European herbals. However, although they were used as a poultice and as an antidote to mushroom poisoning, she says that the pear's role in medicine is not highly significant. That said, in many early cultures, as in our own times, fruit was viewed from the perspective of personal well-being and was considered part of a regime to ensure a healthy lifestyle. Dr Morgan also describes the many methods for cooking, serving and preserving pears, which could be sour, acid, or sweet; some varieties could be eaten off the tree, while others were better for cooking, and still others needed to be prepared before use. Often, the fruit was "bletted", a process which reduces sharpness and lessens the pear's astringency; alternatively, fruit was either kept in a cool place or left on the tree to soften and become sweeter. Alternatively, the fruit was dried after cutting and then placed in the sun, and some were preserved in wine or cooked with wine, honey and warming spices. At great feasts, table centerpieces displayed the finest examples of fruit, and pears and other fruit were often depicted in ancient tile mosaics.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed history of the pear in England where fruit growing was considered a noble pursuit. Monasteries had productive gardens and monks were known to be skilful gardeners who played a role in developing new varieties. They often made hard cider by blending apples and pears. Sometimes the pear was considered more wholesome when cooked or baked. Stewed pears were made by steeping them in syrup with honey, or cooked in red wine with mulberries. Other recipes included cooking

the pears with ginger root. One of England's pears, the Warden, was well-known and had the benefit of excellent keeping qualities. Unfortunately it is thought to be one of the lost varieties.

The book then takes us on a journey through time and place, first describing an Italian fruit renaissance in the sixteenth century, a time of intense interest in fruit quality with a focus on selection and beauty. The number of varieties increased, and attractive selections were made with overall improvement; competition among growers increased, and gorgeous selections of fruit abounded in the markets. Fabulous fruit displays adorned banquet tables, as sweet meats and fruit cakes became part of Italian social life; clearly the sunny Italian climate made fruit sweeter and more colorful. Skill in fruit cultivation was considered prestigious and played a part in the pleasure gardens being created across Europe. Italian villas had formal gardens with large sections devoted to fruit production, where plants were trained into espaliers for ease of harvest and attractiveness as garden plants. The Italians expanded the selection of pears to include those with fruits that ripen in autumn and winter, while further developing preservation techniques, making crystallized fruit and delicious sherbets. Italian still life paintings provide some of the most beautiful images reflective of the grand estates and lavish entertaining, and this Italian love affair with fruit influenced and spread through many parts of Europe.

France became a fruit center during the seventeenth century, with a particular reverence for the pear: one French catalogue from 1628 described 260 pear varieties. French gardens began to separate the growing of utilitarian plants such as fruit trees from other garden areas that focused on beauty and magnificence. As a result, they developed the lovely French *potager*, or fruit and vegetable garden. Paris soon became a center for advanced fruit production and trade which made Paris renowned for its pears and luxury fruit, and the French developed a fondness for eating fresh pears, as well as making confections.

In England during the 1600s, the production of orchard liqueurs such as perry and cider were of interest to the Puritans who were less interested in the extravagant uses of fruit and more interested in agricultural improvement. As pears and other plants were travelling throughout much of Europe, the

British were actively seeking new varieties developed in France. In the 1730s, the English began to create the artificially landscaped park-like gardens of landscape architect Capability Brown. These naturalistic compositions incorporated undulating grasses and serpentine lakes replacing the formally patterned styles, the result being that the fruit trees were relegated to the fruit and vegetable garden.

Along with improvements in communications and transportation, the nineteenth century in Europe was considered the golden age of horticulture. Names became confused as there were many synonyms for pear identities, so they had to be checked and careful documentation for pear varieties became necessary to avoid confusion. Belgium became a center for pear improvement focusing on plant breeding and selection. At this point plants were moving easily through France, England, Scotland, and even arriving in America, so at this point the author takes the reader across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States.

American landowners became interested in fruit cultivation toward the end of the eighteenth century, when trees and scions of pears were being sent to Boston, which was becoming a center of 'pear fever'. In the 1900s, the import and export of pears was common, and in the 1930s, California became the center of pear production due to the climate of California's central valley; it had the ideal environment for fruit production, with its deep soils, mild winters, hot summers, and abundant water from nearby rivers for irrigation. The main pear grown was the "William" (also known as the "Bartlett") due to its being productive and easy to transport without injuring the fruit. With the development of mechanization, the canning of pears became common. As pests and diseases were building up in orchards, chemists and entomologists began developing a range of powders and sprays for the trees. 'Fire blight', a bacterial disease devastating to pear trees, spread and decimated many pear orchards. This resulted in production moving towards the West where conditions were drier and less favorable for the disease. Nowadays the cost for labor and harvesting the fruit is one of the greatest challenges to growers.

Today, there is renewed interest in pears for creating artisan beverages, such the Perry pear for making a beverage similar to cider, for creating dried fruit, relishes and preserves. National collections in Britain

and in the US help to keep track of the many varieties and hopefully avoid losing some of the great pears. In keeping with this, the major section of this book is a superb directory of pear varieties, both ancient and modern. An in-depth history on each pear and its synonyms are provided, as well as the plant's tasting profiles, texture, and detailed descriptions and horticultural information. This directory is primarily based on the pear varieties growing in England's DEFRA² collection.

This volume provides a thorough and in-depth look at pears in the western world from a European viewpoint, making *The Book of Pears* a highly valuable book in the field. In addition, it provides an interesting and reliable history of food, fruit, agriculture, gardens, horticulture and more. Well written and thoroughly researched, *The Book of Pears* stands as a sound resource and is a huge contribution to the world's knowledge of pears. I consider it an essential reference.

HOLLY H. SHIMIZU

Holly H. Shimizu is Executive Director Emeritus of the United States Botanic Garden (Washington DC, USA) and is a nationally recognized horticulturist, consultant, and educator. With a rich background in all aspects of public gardens, she consults public gardens and also lectures and writes on a variety of horticultural topics.

² Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.