



POSITIVES

- Long lived
- Productive
- Can tolerate clay soils
- Can be grown organically
- Drought tolerant
- Fire blight resistant cultivars available
- Big, though semi-dwarf cultivars exist
- Beautiful

NEGATIVES

- Fireblight, which can devastate a tree
- Vulnerability to late freezes
- Messy
- Can attract raccoons and other fruit loving animals

Pear trees with "high" fireblight resistance for Oklahoma

European

- Comice
- Harrow Delight
- Magness
- Moonglow
- Seckel
- Warren

Oriental Hybrids

- Kieffer
- Orient

Asian

- Shinko

SOURCE:
OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION SERVICE

The Mysterious Pear

THE SECRETS OF THIS UNDERAPPRECIATED FRUIT ARE WORTH DISCOVERING

— Maura McDermott —

If you drive down an Oklahoma country road in the early spring when the first fuzz of green is spreading across the pastures, you may notice, here and there, a tall tree ablaze with white flowers.

If you look closer you might discover that it stands next to a falling-down barn or the foundation stones of a forgotten home. Later in the season, if you were to walk over to the tree, you would find it loaded with fruit.

These stately beauties are pears. These hardy, adaptable trees can bear fruit for 50, even 100 years, and along with jonquils and day lilies, often mark the site of old farmsteads.

We have such a tree on our farm near Checotah. It has been going strong since the mid-1960s, planted by the family patriarch, Luther Wood. In good years, the 25-foot tall tree produces 15-20 bushels of fruit and has never been sprayed or fertilized.

The fruit can be eaten fresh — both hard like an apple or after ripening in a paper sack for a week, where it softens and develops the sweet, distinctive taste of a pear. From late September until frost, family, neighbors and friends come to pick or pick up fallen fruit.

I ate my first fresh pear from that tree after we moved back to the farm in 1982. And like Eve, after her fateful bite of the apple, my world was changed (if not so dramatically). I wanted to know more about pears, the good and the bad. And I wanted to plant my own pear tree. Problem was, no one could recall the variety of the family pear.

continued on page sixteen

So I began searching books and catalogs. In the process I learned a lot about the natural history of the pear, which some call the most glorious of fall fruits.

An ancient and venerable fruit

The pear is one of the two-dozen plants known to have been cultivated over 4,000 years. Dried pears have been found in Ice Age cave dwellings in Europe. In China, records show cultivation stretches back 3,000 years. In the *Odyssey* of Homer (9th century B.C. Greece), pears and apples grow in a magical orchard, and are ripe year-round.

The Romans too were crazy about pears, preferring them stewed with honey. King Charlemagne (900 AD) went so far as to command his orchardists to grow varieties of pears for fresh eating, cooking, and storage. Both Shakespeare and Leonardo Da Vinci wrote about them (though Shakespeare was disparaging).

Domesticated pears can be divided into two main groups: European (*Pyrus communis communis*) and Asian (*Pyrus pyrifolia*, *serotina*, *ussierensis*). What most people think of as a pear is the European pear, which is pear-shaped or pyriform. It ripens only after harvest and is best when the flesh is soft.

The Asian pear, which is round, ripens on the tree. It is crisp like an apple, hence its nickname of apple-pear.

A third type of pear, the Oriental hybrid, is a cross between the Asian and European. It is a more recent development and combines characteristics of both.

Both the European and the Asian types have been cultivated from ancient times and in countries across the northern temperate zone from England to Japan. Pear cuttings were brought to the American colonies from Europe in the 1700s. While many acres of Asian pears have been planted in the last few decades, most pears grown in the US are the European type, and some writers refer to these as “true pears.”

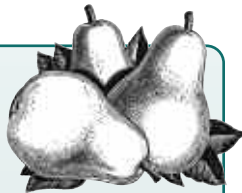
In 1867, one French writer identified 900 varieties in Europe, with 3,000 names. The Bartlett, perhaps the most famous pear in North America, is a good example of a pear with more than one name. It was actually originally called the Stairs pear. The variety was discovered in England in 1765 by a school teacher named Stair.

Then a horticulturist named Williams promoted the variety and it became the Williams pear. For reasons now obscure, *bon Chrétien* (meaning “good Christian”) was tacked onto this name, making the pear *Williams bon Chrétien*.

At the very end of the 1700s, the *Williams* trees were imported into the US and planted on a farm in Roxbury, Massachusetts. The farm was eventually purchased by a man named Enoch Bartlett who, not knowing that the pears already had a name, promoted the variety under his own name. Only in 1828, when a fresh batch of *Williams* trees arrived from England, was it realized that the pears already had a name, but by then *Bartlett* had stuck in North America.

Today, several thousand varieties of pear exist, though like many modern fruits, only a tiny fraction of these are grown commercially. European varieties such as *Bartlett*, *Bosc*, *Anjou*, and *Comice* and Asian varieties such as *20th Century* and *Chojuro* are commonly found in stores. Many others are available to the home gardener.

Pear Fun Facts



- Pear leaves were smoked in Europe before tobacco was introduced
- In Spain, *Esto es la pera* (This is the pear!) describes a particularly wonderful experience.
- Apples, when placed carefully in water, will float; pears will sink.
- Pears are high in vitamin C and fiber and have a mild laxative effect. Hence the name Lightning given to one variety.
- Some perry pears (varieties used in making perry — hard pear cider or sparkling wine) are known for their picturesque names — example, Merrylegs and Mumblehead.
- Lizzie Borden, the accused axe murderess of Fall River, Massachusetts, used pears as an alibi. At the critical time when her father was being murdered she testified that she was in the barn eating three pears from her backyard tree. She was acquitted.
- Perry pear trees can live to a great age, and can be fully productive for 250 years.
- The largest pear tree recorded, in England in 1790, reportedly covered three quarters of an acre and yielded 5-7 tons.
- In Japan, it is a tradition to plant pear trees at each corner of a dwelling to ward off evil spirits.



Kieffer pears turn yellow when ripened on the kitchen counter or in a sack.

The problem with pears

You would think with this lengthy and distinguished history, pears would be more popular than they are. Today the worldwide production of pears at 20 million tons is only ¼ that of its cousin the apple. The United States is #3 in pear production (after China and Italy) but here too the pear takes a backseat to the apple. In any given year, only half the people in the country eat pears, and when they do, it's just one or two.

Why is the pear out of fashion? In one survey people expressed confusion over just what to do with a pear. European-type pears must be picked at the right time and ripened after harvest, under the right conditions, to produce the perfect proportion of texture and flavor. In an age of instant gratification, pears are losers.

This is too bad, because pears are worth the patience it takes to fully appreciate them. Pears can be eaten fresh, made into pies and added to cakes, simmered into butter, pickled, poached in wine, baked with cloves, canned in sugar syrup, steeped in Southern Comfort, fermented into cider and sliced, simply, on a spinach salad, with blue cheese.

Those who have experienced the taste of a dead-ripe pear use adjectives like “luscious, honeyed, succulent, glorious.”

Seems pears can make you gush.

Kieffer: it's a keeper

In Oklahoma peaches, strawberries and wine grapes have harvest festivals, but not pears. The lonesome trees on the abandoned home places stand unpicked, unheralded and unnamed.

Which brings us back to our mystery pear tree.

After leafing through catalogs I finally found a description of a variety that seemed to match Luther Wood's mysterious tree: “An old fashioned variety. Big. Hard. Gold with red blush. Tough skin. Flesh granular, coarse, yellow-white. Gritty. Juicy. Very hardy and disease resistant.

Kieffer. That's got to be it, I thought. I ordered a tree and planted it in the backyard.

That was 25 years ago. After about ten years, the tree came into its own and we've been swamped with pears ever since.

The *Kieffer* is a survivor. In the mid 19th century, fireblight disease was introduced into North America, probably from imported ornamental pears. The disease, which makes the leaves look like they have been burned with a blowtorch, thrives in humid climates and devastated orchards east of the Rockies.

Around that time, Peter Kieffer, a nurseryman from the Philadelphia area, grew and sold a variety of Asian pear, the *Sand*. He also grew the *Bartlett*.

Among chance seedlings in his garden, Kieffer

continued on page eighteen



Check the Neck

European-type pears need to ripen after harvest. Tree-ripened pears mature from the inside out and get mealy or mushy before the outside is “done.” Plus, the full flavor of pears develops through ripening off the tree.

As pears mature, they're easy to detach from the tree. Pick them when they snap off the tree when twisted upward. If you have to tug to pick a pear, it's probably not ready to harvest.

Store pears in a refrigerator or cold cellar at just above freezing. To ripen for eating, allow them to sit at room temperature for several days. Check by pressing the stem end, or neck, of a likely pear. When it yields readily, take a big bite and enjoy.



*Fireblight can turn pear leaves black.
Resistant trees can survive infection and bear fruit.*

observed one that seemed to be resistant (though not immune) to fireblight. This tree bore fruit in 1863 and the rest was fruit history. The *Kieffer* pear could be grown where other pears had succumbed to fireblight, and it quickly became popular across most of the United States. It was particularly suited to the South, where its early blooms were not so likely to be killed by frosts.

These pears grew to be at the heart of a . . . “pear culture peculiar to the South,” notes one commentator, supporting here and there, off and on, for over 100 years, an industry of canning and preserving. Its unique flavor and texture, I learned, is part of the food heritage of the South.

The *Kieffer* pear came to Oklahoma with the first settlers. One hundred years ago, most farms had a family orchard, and pears such as *Kieffer* were a favorite because of how well they grew, how heavily they bore, and how easy they were to take care of. Their very survival so many years later attests to their toughness. Many old timers remember fondly those “big hard pears.”

In Oklahoma, pears used to be grown as a cash crop. According to research done by the Kerr Center a few years ago, in 1930, pears were grown commercially on almost 30,000 (14%) of the farms in the state. By 1959, the number had plummeted to only about 3,000 farms. In 2002 it was down to about 150.

Pears were not the only crop to suffer such declines. As the numbers of family farms have declined, so has pear production. Many of the diversified farms of yesteryear, which often grew several cash crops and a little bit of everything for family consumption, morphed into farms specializing in one or two crops.

These days, Oklahomans don’t grow many pears and they don’t eat many either. Seventy percent of what we do eat is grown outside the state.

Pears for the pickin’

Most commercial pear production is in the dry valleys of Washington and Oregon, alongside apples, and demand has not risen over the last ten years.

That said, perhaps pears are overdue for a comeback. Pear production (at least on the home scale) has become more possible with the development of more fireblight resistant varieties. And with the advent of the Slow Food and Local Food movements, more folks may be tempted to sample fresh pears and learn how to handle them.

For budding orchardists, OSU Extension’s bulletin: “Growing and Producing Pears in Oklahoma” lists ten varieties with high resistance to fireblight and covers the basics, including site selection, planting, pruning, thinning and other cultivation tips.

Experts advise would-be growers to be cautious, however, since demand is still low, fireblight has not disappeared, and European varieties, in particular, require such careful handling.

Despite these negatives, ATTRA, the national sustainable agriculture information service says, “In most of the U.S. pears may be the easiest of the tree fruits to produce organically or with minimal spraying. Pears’ fertility requirements are not high, they are adapted to a wide range of climates and soils, and they have fewer pest problems than other tree fruits.”

My experience bears this out. While our tree has had two bouts with fireblight over the twenty-five years, in each case, the disease remained confined to just a few limbs and didn’t impact the overall health of the tree. Otherwise, the tree has been pest free. Occasional late freezes have been our worst problem, and can completely wipe out that year’s crop.

While reading up on pears for this article, I noticed that my tree, the old-reliable *Kieffer* has been bumped from the top of the list of desirable trees by up-and-coming varieties. These newer fireblight resistant cultivars are also considered to be of “fine dessert quality,” i.e. very good to eat fresh. Those who have an opinion say that *Kieffers* are better for canning and cooking, and are a little below par for the discerning modern pear eater. As one writer put it, the *Kieffer* does not attain the “melting flesh” of dessert-quality pears.

Maybe so. Still I find a ripe *Kieffer* pear melts pretty fast in my mouth.

Pears of any type, in my book, are worth a try. As one admirer, De Sires, the father of French agriculture, wrote in 1608 —

“There is no tree among all those planted which abounds so much in kinds of fruits as the pear tree, whose different sorts are innumerable and their different qualities wonderful . . .

Pears are found round, long ‘goderonnees’ pointed, blunt, small, and large. Gold, silver, vermilion, and satin green are found among the pears. Sugar, honey, cinnamon, clove, flavor them. They smell of musk, amber, and chive. In short, so excellent are the fruits that an orchard would not be worthwhile in a place where pear trees do not thrive.”

My sentiments, exactly.



Resources

■ **For the true pear geek:** www.facebook.com/USApears

■ **Growing:**

Spring and fall are pear planting seasons. Check your local nursery for trees or search online.

“Growing and Producing Pears in Oklahoma,” Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, HLA-6257, available online or from county extension offices.

“Organic Pear Production,” National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, <http://www.attra.ncat.org>, 800.346.9140

■ **For astonishing recipes,** including celebrity pear faves: <http://www.usapears.com/Recipes%20And%20Lifestyle/Now%20Serving/Recipes.aspx>

■ **Enthusiasts:** The North American Fruit Explorers, Southern Pear Interest Group, www.nafex.org/index.htm

■ **Fun Reads:**

“Pear Harvest” by Dooly Barlow, Noble Foundation, www.noble.org/Ag/Horticulture/PearHarvest/index.html

“The Pear in History, Literature, Popular Culture, and Art” by Jules Janick, Purdue University www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/pearinhistory.pdf