

## Medlar - a forgotten fruit

**Edible fruit harvested in the garden in the middle of winter? This is what you do with the medlar, a fruit that was widespread centuries ago but which is almost unknown today. You can rediscover it in your garden.**

I'd never heard of the medlar until the municipality planted this small tree in the park opposite to my house. At planting in March, the young tree was only about three meters high and was still bare, but had a protruding, highly branched crown. In spring, the tree put out relatively large, dark green leaves, which had a lighter, hairy, felt-like underside.



From May to June, large white flowers proliferated on the Medlar that attracted many insects to a feast of pollen and nectar. A small, apple-like, green-yellow fruit with recognizable sepals at the top sprouted from the flowers over the course of summer. In autumn, an enchanting orange-yellow to red-brown colouring transformed the leaves of the tree. The furry brown fruit was very hard and I did not believe it was edible. Apparently, it got softer due to the effects of frost, because I saw blackbirds and Turkish pigeons pecking at it more frequently in winter. My observations initially led me to think of exotic species, but a friend in my local nursery explained to me that this tree was a medlar *Mespilus germanica*, which produced a very popular fruit in former times.

### A popular fruit tree a hundred years ago



I could tell from the five-petal flowers of the common or real medlar that, like apple and pear, it belongs to the extensive rose family (*Rosaceae*). It probably originates in the region extending from the Near East to Southern Europe. Like many other fruit trees, it was brought over the Alps by the Romans and quickly achieved wide popularity. The

Emperor Charlemagne ordered the cultivation of the medlar on his country estates via the *Capitulare de villis*. The fruit was very popular in medieval monastery and farmer gardens, because the fruit's high tannin content softened the cloudiness of wine, apple cider and perry and improved their shelf life. To process for jam or stewed fruit, however, medlar fruit has to go through a few

frosty nights before it turns into soft, aromatic fruit. When fully ripe, the fruit has a very limited shelf life and quickly loses its valuable constituent substances.

### **Medlars in the garden**



In spring, when there are no longer heavy night frosts, medlar fruit trees can be planted in a sunny location in normal garden soil. The medlar is self-pollinating, very robust and requires little care. Occasional pruning of dead wood is sufficient. Its fruit may be harvested as soon as a few frosty nights have completely coloured the fruity pulp brown. You can eat the fruit raw or convert it into stewed fruit or jam.

The fruit has very high vitamin C content.

### **Varieties of medlar suitable to gardens**

There are many different types of medlar that go well in gardens. Follows a small selection:

#### **Nottingham**

Large fruited, highly productive, English variety. The small tree bears large, spherical fruit, 4 cm in diameter with a sweet and sour aroma.

#### **Hollandia large-fruited**

Highly productive, old, Dutch variety with large fruit 5 cm in diameter. Robust growing variety with laurel-like leaves.

#### **Sweet medlar**

Discovered in Germany in the sixties, with medium-sized fruit low in tannin content, but featuring a strong dose of fructose.

#### ***Delice de Vannes* Medlar**

This is grown in the Vannes botanical garden in France. It bears regular and abundant round, medium-sized fruit with an excellent taste.

#### **Seedless Medlar**

This variety is very rare and has small, seedless fruit that is considered the most flavourful. The yield is lower than that of other varieties, but processing is easier due to the lack of seeds.

### **Evreinoff's Monstrous Medlar**

The botanist V. A. Evreinoff discovered the mother tree in France in 1941. The medlar is a very luxuriant plant that can reach 3 to 4 meters in height. Since it is only mildly self-fertile, it needs a second variety in the near vicinity. It has the largest diameter fruit, attaining 7 to 8 cm, pink to brownish pulp and a slightly flattened fruit shape. The taste of the fruit is very pleasant.

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