

Norton Priory: the Quince-essential Garden

John Budworth, Head Gardener and “a bit of a quince expert”, on the National Collection of this unusual and rarely grown fruit.



Norton Priory truly is a secret garden; hidden behind woodland and not far from the M56, this 18th century walled garden is little known in comparison to other Cheshire attractions.

Norton Priory's walled garden was built for the Brooke Family between 1757 and 1770 to provide fruit, vegetables, herbs and flowers for their Georgian house, Norton Hall. After the family moved away in the 1920s the trapezoid-shaped garden became neglected until it was restored in the 1980s. It is now part of the larger Norton Priory Museum & Gardens site. Other highlights include medieval priory ruins, woodland walks, icehouse, and tea room. A brand new museum will open in August 2016.

Norton Priory Museum & Gardens is home to the National Collection of Tree Quince (*Cydonia Oblonga*) which is looked after by Head Gardener John Budworth, who has worked at the site for over 25 years and can be considered a bit of a

quince expert! John regularly offers tips and for looking after your quince trees, as well as the many other fruits and flowers grown in the Georgian Walled Garden and orchard including traditional varieties of pear and apple trees. Quince trees can be purchased from Norton Priory. These trees are propagated by Clifford Cain using Norton Priory stock.

Quince are an apple or pear shaped fruit with a golden yellow skin and a strong, spicy scent. It is not eaten fresh as it is hard and bitter when raw but is delicious stewed with meat or boiled with sugar to produce mouth-watering jams or jellies.

Quince is popular with home bakers as it contains a high amount of pectin which makes it ideal for making jams and jellies. It is also high in antioxidants so it has many health qualities.

Quince would have been preserved in the autumn and eaten throughout the year in medieval times and is believed to have been the forbidden 'apple' which tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden.

Quince is not grown widely in the UK, Norton Priory are lucky to have 25 different cultivars of Quince, with two trees of each variety. It is quite easy to grow, is in the Rosacea family and grows to about 4 to 6 metres high depending on its rootstock.

Quince trees have to be pruned



in the summer and winter, then there's fertilising, watering and fruit picking. It is reasonably free of pest and disease, but John's secret is using a garlic barrier spray to protect from quince leaf blight.

Quince leaf blight can be a problem – leaves start to speckle and drop, but the fruit remains edible.

Quince also like full sun and a rich, loamy soil, they don't need much feeding once established but require moisture in dry summers.



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Norton Priory: a truly secret garden

A new tree takes a while to bear fruit, usually around five years. By the time the tree is about eight you could be getting as much as 15kg of fruit from it. Try to leave the quince on the tree as long as you can so it can ripen to a good yellow, but make sure you pick it before the first frosts.

Once picked the fruit can bruise easily, they can be kept for up to four months, but store them separately from other fruit though as the perfume can affect the taste of other fruits such as apples.

With such intensive labour John is very grateful for the help he receives from the small gardening team and the gardening volunteers who help

keep the two and a half acre garden looking its best. We also work in partnership with Halton Borough Council's day services who work with adults with disabilities to run a tea room, micro-brewery and ice cream parlour on site.

We sell the produce from the garden to the public, but also use some to make the jams, jellies and juices for sale in our gift shop.

The jams and preserves are made especially for us by award winning Jane Maggs who operates under the name Wild & Fruitful. Jane was recently featured on BBC 1's Countryfile making a traditional quince marmalade in the Norton Priory garden. She will use anything

we have picked from the garden, inventing recipes to suit whatever we give her. This means we have different varieties of jams, preserves and pickles on offer throughout the year depending on what has grown well in the garden the previous season.

Every October Norton Priory holds a Quince & Apple Day celebration. Quince & Apple Day will take place in Sunday 9th October 2016. The walled garden is open daily between 10am and 5pm from 1st April until October 31st 2016. Norton Priory produce, including quince preserves, are available in the Walled Garden shop, located in the Gardener's Cottage.

Jane Maggs' Quince Marmalade Recipe as featured on BBC 1's Countryfile

The recipe used is dated 1697 for a 'white marmalade of quinces'. All it requires is quinces and sugar.

"Preparation: quinces are very hard and whilst recipes tell you to peel and/or grate them raw, I find parboiling before peeling much easier. Most recipes also tell you quinces take ages to cook. I do not find this to be the case. Bring clean quinces to the boil and cook until slightly soft but not mushy. If too mushy they fall to bits and are hard to peel. Keep the boiling water. With any luck the skins will slip off like beetroot. If not, peel normally and cut the flesh away from the core. Chop coarsely into sizes you might like to see on your scone or toast."

"Cooking: weigh the chopped quince with enough of the boiling water to just cover. Yes, you can use the boiling water too as quinces are so high in flavour and pectin! If you are at all nervous about the set put the quince cores and peels in a bag and cook up with quince flesh. Bring the quinces in their water to the boil. If they are still a bit hard finish cooking them now, otherwise add the sugar. The weight of sugar will be 75% of whatever is the combined weight of quinces and water. Lower the heat and stir to dissolve the sugar, then, when the sugar is dissolved boil hard until a set is reached. Remove the bag, if added, and squeeze. The old recipes do not add lemon juice (quince will set perfectly well without it) but I add it to balance the sweetness as quince has no acidity in its flavour. The colour of the preserve will be pale amber. If you cook a little slower you will get a beautiful 'red marmalade of quinces' as you watch the colour darken to a beautiful deep amber."

"If you did not use the peels and cores, quince is so accommodating that you can even make quince jelly with the boiling water! if you boil the peels and cores in a bag with the remaining quince water until everything in the bag is mushy, squeeze the bag, strain the boiling water through a sieve and add sugar as before and boil as before, add some lemon juice, maybe 2 tbsp to 500ml, and boil to a set, you will get a beautiful amber-coloured quince jelly."

