

Sweet cherries in Luxembourg

Since 2011 the Luxembourg Conservation Trust (natur&ëmwelt – Fondation Hëllef fir d'Natur) has been making a special effort to conserve cherry varieties that are typical of our region. The aim is threefold: to map old cherry trees; to determine their varieties; and to propagate these varieties on young trees. Some of the resultant trees will be planted in conservation orchards to secure their sustainable future. Others (varieties which can hardly ever be found in commercial nurseries) will form part of future natur&ëmwelt planting projects.



Cherry varieties — all different — from the valley around Trintinge (Waldbredimus), a cherry tree hotspot.

Identifying the different varieties is a job for the specialist — someone with years of experience, an extensive reference collection of cherry stones, and the willingness to tackle the historical literature. The person with the necessary expertise is Dr Annette Braun-Lüllemann, a cherry specialist of regional, if not more, renown. The job of propagating the old varieties on young trees has been entrusted to two nurseries: Noehl from Holsthum (near Irrel) and Schmitz from Trier. Cherry grafting is a tricky enough enterprise at the best of times; it is made even trickier, though, by the fact that grafts taken from old trees are often very weak and require delicate handling. The project receives financial support from the *Ministère du Développement durable et des Infrastructures, Département de l'Environnement*.

It is not always possible to place every variety in one of the known and clearly described categories. So the different varieties are allocated to one of five categories:

Name / criteria	Number
<u>Varieties with an official name</u> Can be matched with a conventional name in the literature and in tree nursery catalogues.	38
<u>Varieties with local names (LN)</u> Cannot be matched with a conventional name in the literature and in tree nursery catalogues. There is, however, a local name.	8
<u>Unknown varieties with working names (AN)</u> Cannot be matched with a conventional name in the literature and in tree nursery catalogues. Given a working name which is characteristic of the variety.	24
<u>Varieties which cannot be clearly identified (UK)</u> Specimens unsuitable (e.g. too few fruits; fruits too unripe or over-ripe) for clear identification, and no point in giving a working name (AN).	18
<u>Seedlings with interesting characteristics</u> Trees which, given their location, age and looks, were clearly not planted, and which have fruits which are interesting in terms of taste, form and colour.	3

The outcome is quite remarkable: we were able to identify 38 varieties and classify them under an official name. In the Trintange valley and surrounds in particular, we found eight varieties that bear a local name and have no known connections beyond the immediate region. 24 varieties are to date unknown. We won't know whether we can resolve the 'mystery' of these until we have done further research. We gave these varieties a working name (AN). **The mapping project has therefore so far yielded an amazing 70 different cherry varieties at least!** 'At least' because the unclear, not readily identifiable category probably includes one or more 'new' varieties that will be categorised over the coming years.

We also recorded a number of seedlings. These are trees with genetically independent characteristics which grew by chance from a seed (i.e. from a stone). They are not regarded as a true variety. Because of their interesting fruit properties, though, we thought that three of these seedlings might be worth propagating, with a view perhaps to starting an entirely new variety. Unfortunately one of these interesting seedlings (*Ardenner Spitzchenkirsche*) was grubbed up before we could do a proper graft.

Richard Dahlem



Choque is one of Luxembourg's most popular distillation cherries. It has a high sugar content and is highly acidic.



An unknown variety, discovered in Bech: provisionally known as ‘Jokesbierger Schwarzkirsche’.



These cherries are not unripe. This is their normal appearance: ‘Drogans Gelbe Knorpelkirsche’.

The range of varieties seen from a wider perspective

The range of varieties found in Luxembourg differs from the results of similar mapping projects in nearby regions in two respects. For one thing, the proportion of light red varieties is very high. Varieties which bear local names are almost always light red. They are outstandingly tasty, have a very special perfume, and are very sweet. For this reason, most of them have been and are still used in the distilling industry. The favourites here, in terms of taste, are *Choque*, which originated in the areas around Metz, and *Rouja*, which produces very sturdy and robust trees.

For another, there are examples of very rare varieties of cherries that used to be distributed beyond our region — e.g. the light red *Winklers Weiße Herzkirsche*, of which only two locations are known in Germany, and the likewise very old variety *Späte Spanische*.

On the other hand, standard varieties which are widespread in neighbouring areas of Germany, like *Große Schwarze Knorpelkirsche*, *Schneiders Späte Knorpelkirsche* and *Büttners Rote Knorpelkirsche*, are found here only sporadically on old trees. Only *Hedelfinger* and *Große Prinzessin (Napoleon)*, which are sold widely by nurseries, are equally widespread in Luxembourg. It would seem that fruit-growers in Luxembourg have always preferred the

traditional regional varieties, and that internationally known varieties — more particularly the varieties of German origin sold by the nurseries — have found only little take-up in Luxembourg.

Right up to post-war period, Luxembourg's fruit-growers evidently preferred to do their own propagating: seedlings were taken from the woods and planted in orchards; a few years later they were given grafts of varieties that were locally popular and readily available.

Luxembourg can be glad that it has evidently been spared the kind of 'variety-cleansing' that has befallen lots of the traditional cherry-growing areas of Germany. This is apparently because Luxembourg missed out on the trend which set in from the 1960s — away from light red, soft-fleshed varieties towards a more intensive form of fruit-growing, based on a restricted range of varieties and focusing on dark, firm-fleshed, late-ripening cherries.

What this means is that the varieties still found in Luxembourg are all the more important!

The general trend towards a more restricted range of cherries is becoming evident in Luxembourg too, though. Nurseries are offering trees with only a limited range of the internationally known varieties. It is becoming almost impossible to find local varieties like *Choque* or *Rouja*. And this is the way things are likely to be in the future.

Most of the local varieties we found in the course of this project are growing on healthy trees; they have an excellent flavour and are well adapted to their specific locations in Luxembourg. This makes them, in most cases, a sounder bet for gardeners and for anyone thinking of planting up a grazed-meadow orchard than the few international varieties stocked by nurseries. Their high-quality flavour and health properties also make them a suitable basis for propagation research. It would be good if Luxembourg's nurseries were to stock more of these interesting local varieties. This would ensure that the current wide range of cherries will retain their place in Luxembourg's countryside, as a genetic resource and as part of our cultural heritage.

Dr. A. Braun-Lüllemann



Dr. Annette Braun-Lüllemann mapping sweet cherries in Ettelbrück. The Heinenhaff orchard in Ettelbrück is, along with the Trintange valley in the commune of Waldbredimus, the most important location for sweet cherries in Luxembourg.