

# Saving tastes of summer

People are increasingly growing a proportion of their own food. **Mary Berry** encourages us to preserve the surplus, with easy ways to enjoy the harvest long after the season has ended. Photography by Neil Hepworth and Tim Sandall

**WHAT JOY EACH SEASON** brings in the garden, especially now so many of us are 'growing our own', supplying our kitchens with a feast of fruit and vegetables. During the past few years, many British gardeners have become more aware of 'food miles', the benefit of buying locally and the pleasure that can be brought when producing, eating and sharing home-grown produce. As early as 1917, during the First World War, the RHS assisted a Government scheme to promote allotments by setting up model allotments in every major population centre. Showing how to get the best out of each cultivated area, the Society created pamphlets on bottling fruits and vegetable preservation. And so the enthusiasm for such an undertaking continues today.

Methods of preserving produce have, over the years, changed. For example, in hot climates such as Morocco or Mexico, drying was the natural way of preservation for beans, chillies, sultanas and apricots – and, in more recent years, sun-dried tomatoes. Yet in Britain, drying is not practical in the climate, except for some herbs and mushrooms. Here, in the past, we were more likely to bottle fruit, pickle vegetables or make chutneys and jams as a way of preservation. Now, the most popular method is by freezing.

## Freezing: lessons to be learned

My first recollection of preserving was with my mother during the Second World War, coping with gluts from the garden, bottling and making jams, pickles and chutneys. I even remember the excitement of acquiring a domestic canning machine, which Dad operated using surplus fruits at the end of the season. Herbs and apple rings were dried over the stove and we sliced beans with a machine that clipped onto the kitchen table – we then packed the slices in layers with salt to use in winter.

But times have changed, and the freezer has without doubt revolutionised preservation. Now, little or no extra specialist equipment is needed. Freezing produce is the most efficient way to preserve fruit and vegetables until the season comes round again, as long as the freezer is kept below  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $0^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). It retains maximum flavour, colour and nutrients. You can freeze fruits and vegetables when they are at their best (such as carrots) and when they are small and tender (broad beans). Soft fruits such as raspberries freeze brilliantly: I grow far more 'Autumn Bliss' than can be eaten so the surplus is frozen. The best ones are kept whole and the softer ones are made into coulis to serve with ice cream (rhubarb coulis is also great). When freezing soft fruit, 'open freeze'

them on trays (separated from each other so they are not touching) until firm and then the frozen berries can be put into plastic tubs and returned to the freezer. Freeze blackcurrants and redcurrants separately, ready to use later in crumbles, pies or summer puddings. Fruits can be frozen without blanching, then used straight from the freezer when you have time to make jams and jellies.

## Jams: store cupboard preserves

Making jams and jellies is an excellent way of preserving fruit, but it seems to be not as popular now due to the decline of traditional afternoon tea, and the availability of ready-made products. Fruits with a high pectin content (pectin is a natural substance that is used as a gelling agent) are easiest to get a good set: examples include blackcurrants, gooseberries, plums, raspberries, cultivated blackberries and apples. Gather fruits on a dry day when they are just ripe – this ensures the balance of pectin and sugar levels are at their best for jam making. Those with a low pectin content (such as strawberries, mulberries and 'Morello' cherries) need extra pectin. 'Jam sugar' (with added pectin), which is easy to use and readily available, gives the best results and I find it preferable to using liquid pectin from a bottle.

I grow 'Gariguette' strawberries and ►



PAUL BULLIVANT

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**'CHUTNEYS CAN BE MADE FROM A HOST OF VEGETABLES AND FRUITS, AND ARE AN IDEAL WAY OF USING UP RIPE OR GREEN TOMATOES, COURGETTES, SQUASH, PLUMS OR WINDFALL APPLES.'**



RICHARD FAULKS



at the end of the season, when just the small misshapen ones are left, I use them for jam. The end result is a delicious conserve and an evocative reminder of the summer past.

Jellies to accompany meat and game are also popular in modern cooking and apples are the best base – use windfall 'Bramley's Seedling' apples or crab apples (cultivars of *Malus*). Whole spices or lemon zest can be added for flavour, as well as chopped fresh sage, mint or rosemary, which themselves can make useful preserves for winter. Herbs can be cut in summer, frozen and kept until needed. Also try adding chopped mint to redcurrant jelly for a flavour-some accompaniment to meats in a late winter meal (I know I should dig some mint up in autumn, pot it up in the glasshouse for fresh mint earlier in the season, but never get round to it).

Chutneys can be made from a host of vegetables and fruits, and are an ideal way of using up ripe or green tomatoes, courgettes, squash, plums or windfall apples, straight from the garden. Remove any damaged or blemished parts. The other essential ingredients for successful chutneys are vinegar, sugar, salt and spices. Onion and garlic give added flavour, too.

A food processor is a great help in preparing produce, but do not be tempted to chop it up too finely or it will end up mushy and wet, instead of having good texture. Where possible, add home-grown herbs – chopped thyme or rosemary are my favourites. Infuse lemon grass and bay leaves in a muslin bag with conventional whole spices in chutney when simmering, and remove before adding sugar. For safety reasons, avoid cooking chutney in brass, copper or iron pans as they react to the vinegar – use stainless steel or aluminium instead. Always use clean, sterilized jars with screw tops for preserving; Kilner jars are perfect, especially if the end result is to be given as a gift. Old-fashioned cellophane tops with wax circles are time consuming to secure and not suitable for chutney because the cellophane's keeping quality is not robust enough for long-term storage.

#### Pickling: selective choices

At home, it is easy to pickle different crops. First, the vegetables must be prepared (harvested, cleaned and skinned) and some are then cooked. There is a wide range of produce that can be pickled, with herb and chilli vinegars making increasingly popular presents in attractive bottles – the popularity of home-made presents seems to be a welcome comeback. The herbs should be pickled before flowering: best are French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) and thyme (*Thymus* species). Chives can also be used.

A favourite to pickle is beetroot: I grow round 'Pablo', which seems to be best pickled when the size of a golfball (if pickling whole). Harvest them larger if you prefer to slice them; unlike some beetroots, this cultivar does not go woody as it gets larger.

Small, tight-skinned onions such as 'SY 300' are good for pickling and great for using on barbecues or adding to a casserole. As with normal, larger onions,

they also dry-store well. I have had success growing heat-treated (which stops bolting) white onion 'Hytech' and red onion 'Hyred', and when matured they are hung out to dry on wires in the glasshouse; for kitchen use, they last us almost until the season comes round again. We grow just three 'Byblos' cucumbers in our unheated glasshouse and they yield plenty of cucumbers for salads and some for pickling, sliced with sweet vinegar and plenty of dill. To make chilli vinegar use small and red 'Apache'.

Look at surpluses as opportunities. There is a wealth of ideas for dealing with produce from a kitchen garden or allotment. Whether preserving vegetables in pickle or making tasty fruit jam, tried-and-tested culinary techniques can help your freshly harvested crop continue to taste delicious. Stick to the basic rules and preserving the spoils of the garden can be hugely rewarding. ■

Mary Berry is a cookery writer and passionate gardener

## CELEBRATE A TASTE OF AUTUMN

Exploring the diversity of autumnal produce, the RHS continues to celebrate 'grow your own' this year. All four RHS gardens will host a festival of taste, smell and touch. Visitors will be able to enjoy fruit and vegetable displays, produce tasting, pumpkin days and, at some sites, watch cookery demonstrations, as part of the Society's A Taste of Autumn festivities, sponsored by NS&I. This year's highlights include:

- **RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey:** 16–19 Oct, including a horticultural advice desk, children's activities, food stalls and apple-pressing demonstrations;
- **RHS Garden Rosemoor, Devon:** 26 Sept–26 Oct, featuring an apple day to commemorate the 200th anniversary of 'Bramley's Seedling' apple (see *The Garden*, March, pp168–171) and a fungus foray;
- **RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Essex:** 24–25 Oct, focusing on a harvest festival display, as well as food stalls and rare apples for sale;
- **RHS Garden Harlow Carr, North Yorkshire:** 25 Oct–1 Nov, including an opportunity to find out how to plant up autumn veg and herb containers, family activities for making seed collages, and a pumpkin competition.

**i Further details:** please check with each garden before visiting for specific events; see also Gardens to Visit, p703 for more information.  
 ● For a full list of events, visit: [www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown](http://www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown) and follow the links to A Taste of Autumn



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