

Fragrant News

Autumn 2006

As the days close in and daylight saving time reverts to standard time then herbalists and gardeners should be finishing the season's harvest before the first frosts arrive. All summer, as



herb flowers peak the herbalist has been out harvesting the plants for herbal teas, ointments and tinctures. As the season ends there is a growing collection of jams and preserves in the pantry. With modern technology, it is much easier to part-process fruit and vegetables and pack it into freezer bags for mid-winter soups, casseroles and cakes. The garden is being trimmed and tidied for the colder months ahead. The compost and the bonfire are both growing in size. My wise old gardening

Dad always admired the cut down foliage. "All the energy from the sun and the plants that has gone into making it!" he would exclaim. He loved the bonfire smoke this time of year too. "Ahh!" he would breath it in "The Essence of the year!"

CRAB APPLE TREES

A tree that has many uses is a bonus in the garden. Crab apples perform well in the garden year round. In spring they burst into bud and delight us with their covering of frothy, white and pink blossoms. It is another welcomed facet of spring to see the daffodils, the lambs and the blossom. Crab apple blossom is sweet and showy. For a few weeks the birds and bees welcome a change in their diet as they eat the buds or harvest the nectar.

As the blossoms fall the fat little apples, or crabs, start to appear. As summer progresses, the leaf cover of the crab apple provides shelter and shade in the garden. Most crab apple trees are quite modest and will grow slowly to reach a maximum height of three or four metres. They can be pruned in July and topped if the height needs to be regulated and maintained at a required height. They tend to keep a narrow form so are ideal adjacent to barbeque, pool or patio areas. In autumn there are two features – the fruit have matured and are ready for harvest and soon the leaves will develop autumn tones as they turn colour and fall.



Now is the time to be planting fruit trees in the garden. While they are still dormant the roots have good opportunity to set roots and get established before the hot and dry summer weather. There are a wide variety of crab apple trees available for the garden. Fruit can range in colour from green, yellow or red. They can either be left on the trees as winter feed for birds or they can be harvested and made into a variety of tasty dishes. The pectin content of crab apples is high and provides one of the best fruits to make apple jelly. Crab Apple Jelly is gourmet food! Atop fresh scones or spread on a warm pikelet is one of nature's gifts.

Crab Apples have an ancient history. Wassailing the orchard on Christmas Eve was a European ceremony that blessed the trees to ensure a good crop for the next summer. (Here in the southern hemisphere June 21st would be our celebration.) Hot cakes were placed in the branches and cider was flung over the branches. Sounds like a good excuse to have a party! Roast apples or crabs were part of the feast. In Midsummer's Night Dream Puck says

“ And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's
In very likeness of a roasted crab.”

GOURMET PRESERVES – DECORATIVE & EDIBLE

PRESERVING –HISTORICAL REASONS

Ever since people have harvested vegetables, fruits, nuts, grains and meat there has been a need to preserve the excess to allow the population to survive until the next summer and the next harvest. Most communities have some sort of ceremony to acknowledge and pay homage for the successful bounty of summer and hard work. With modern appliances the need to preserve food is no longer of such vital importance to the average household. But the methods used to preserve crops are the traditional ways that have been used, in some cases for thousands of years.

PRESERVING INGREDIENTS

Containers – Any container that will hold food and liquid can be used. The top must be sealable so no air or bacteria can enter. All containers have bacteria so they need to be sterilised just prior to being filled.

Salt – is the oldest food additive. It causes the cells of food to be saturated and leeches out the food juices.



Vinegar- originated from sour wine. Today it is made from acetic acid. (Alcohol is a good preservative too.) The acid content keeps bacteria and germs out of the food. By boiling the vinegar it becomes sterile.

Oil- (or fat) also surrounds the food particles and will seal the food from air and bacteria.

Spices and Herbs – many have anti- bacterial properties that enhance the flavour and can over- ride saltiness in taste.

Food – Needs to be at the peak of growth – neither too green nor too ripe.

HERBAL VINEGARS

Vinegar is acidic so it will kill germs. Many organic cleaners contain vinegar. By preserving herbs in vinegar the scent and healing or culinary properties of the herbs leach into the vinegar giving it a new dimension. Culinary vinegars such as thyme, rosemary, tarragon, sage or oregano can be used to flavour vinaigrettes. These are used as salad dressings and in some cooked dishes. Lavender, rosemary, pine, sage are some of the vinegars that have assorted cosmetic uses. These can also be used in spray bottles as disinfectants in the bathroom.

HERBAL OILS

Herbs soaked in oil will release their flavours and healing properties. When only goose or hog fat was available then the herbs were cooked in that to make ointments. Using cold -pressed vegetable oils instead of animal fat, herbs can be prepared in the same way.

PICKLED ONIONS

Choose small, unblemished onions and peel them. Cut as little away from the ends as possible. Too much will cause the onions to burst in the jar. To every jar's worth of prepared onions add one teaspoon of plain salt. Place together in a plastic container and cover with cold water. Leave 24 hours. Drain off liquid and rinse onions in running water. Pack tightly into sterilised containers. Pour over boiling hot pickling vinegar and fill to the top edge. Cover each jar with a lid. When cold, tap jars on top of bench to release any trapped air. When cold remove lid and wipe off the condensation with a clean cloth. Screw or attach lid firmly.

PICKLING VINEGAR

2 cups vinegar

1 cup water

1 tbsp plain salt

Stir the salt into the water. Bring to the boil. Add the vinegar and bring to the boil again.

PICKLED GARLIC

Choose plump, unblemished garlic cloves. Peel each clove and place in a small jar. Add whole mustard and a bay leaf. Poor in oil till the garlic is covered. Seal. When garlic is required in a

stir-fry or any cooked dish, remove required number of cloves from jar using a clean skewer or spoon. (This eliminates introducing any bacteria that could grow in the container.) The oil can also be used in both cooking and making dressings.

PICKLED MUSHROOMS

Use small, fresh, button mushrooms. Wipe them clean with a paper towel and recut the stem. Prepare the pickling vinegar. Meanwhile, put the mushrooms in a fry pan, sprinkle with salt and cook gently. When all the liquid that forms has evaporated off add the pickling vinegar along with a whole chilli, peppercorns, pimento and a bay leaf. Bring to the boil, carefully spoon into jars and seal.

PICKLED CUCUMBERS

Slice cucumbers finely. (The slicing disc on a food processor can be used.) Add whole peppercorns, finely diced red and yellow capsicums, finely chopped chilli and whole mustard. To the pickling vinegar when preparing and bringing to the boil add ½ cup white sugar and dissolve well. If a sweeter taste is preferred add more sugar at this stage. Spoon vegetable and spice into jars. Pour over vinegar mix and seal.

ORNAMENTAL PICKLING

A large glass jar with sealable lid can be filled with both fruit and vegetables. Boiling white vinegar can be slowly poured into the container. Place lid on top but wait until the jar is cold before gently rearranging the display and removing any air bubbles. Screw lid on firmly and seal with hot wax. Look at examples and gain ideas for cutting fruit into attractive shapes and designs.

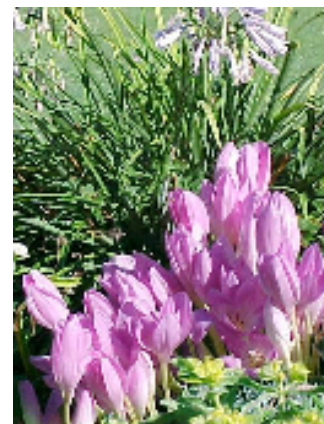
FINISHES & LABELS

There are many artistic ways to finish off the preserves to show them at their best. Coloured wax can easily be used on small jars and bottles. Material and fancy paper circles can be tied around with different ribbons, raffia, elastic and plastic ties. Label the preserves carefully with date of making and list the contents. Computers provide a wide choice of labelling systems that produce pretty and practical art -work. Neatly handwritten labels are most acceptable for a handmade product.

SAFFRON

Autumn is definitely here when the autumn bulbs start flowering. Autumn crocus (*Colchicum autumnale*) put on a brilliant display with a nice splash of pinky purple in the garden. The Autumn crocus was once used by the ancient Greeks to treat kidney complaints and asthma. In more recent medicinal history they were a standard treatment for gout. Because of the presence of the alkaloid colchicine, which affects cell division, the plant is used in genetic research in modern times.

There is a similar looking plant that comes in to flower as the Autumn Crocus finishes. It is regarded as being the most costly spice in the world and yet it is very easy to grow here in the Manawatu and most parts of New Zealand! The Saffron crocus has the same pale purple tones as the Autumn Crocus. However, it sits quite close to the ground and displays the three bright orange threads that make it such an exciting and exotic herb. These three threads need to be joined by about 150,000 more just to make one kilo of saffron. For over four thousand years saffron has been highly prized and a sort after commodity. It was carried on the silk trade routes to Europe and in the Asian communities it has long been used and treasured. The Saffron threads will dissolve readily in any liquid. In cooking they are used to colour food. Usually just three or four threads are sufficient to change



the soup, rice, vegetable, and cake or bread recipe to a bright sunny yellow. The Buddhist monks are most distinctive and recognizable in their saffron dyed robes.

Saffron grows from a small bulb that can be planted either in the ground or containers now.

They need a well -drained area and can be left in the same place without being lifted at the end of the season. They flower when quite small and once established develop lots of offsets and divide quickly to form a mass of bulbs in future years. Pulling the threads out of each flower and setting aside to dry will give the home gardener their own supply of the most costly spice in the world.

Hope you have enjoyed sharing this information. We do appreciate the feedback we receive from fellow nature admirers.

**Herbally yours,
Marilyn and Ian**

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