

Gooseberries *Rebekah Panayides*

I have just completed the most dangerous job in the garden. It doesn't involve ladders, power tools or the use of noxious chemicals - I've pruned my overgrown gooseberry bushes. I have a row of four, a couple of the old variety Leveller and some unnamed bushes from my Grandad's garden. Having missed this job for the last couple of years, I'm now confronted with one tangled, spiky, prickly mass. After several hours, a thick pair of gloves and much deliberation, I eventually removed almost a third of their bodyweight so they now resemble the textbook goblet form and, I must admit, do look much shapelier. Pruning produces a healthier plant; it encourages air to circulate through the bush, which, in turn, helps prevent mildew and should enable me to spot signs of the defoliating sawfly quicker, but my main reason for this cut back is self-preservation. I'll now be able to weed and mulch underneath without shredding my hands and, more importantly, picking this year's harvest won't be such a painful experience.

Regardless of the occasional stab and thorn splinter, I wouldn't be without gooseberries. I love the fresh, sharp flavour although I no longer crunch the unripe ones quite as freely as I did as a child. (I was often caught and told off by the aforementioned Grandfather!). Goosegogs are such a versatile fruit and can be picked at different stages of ripening, thereby extending their season, so unlike other soft fruit there is less of a pressing demand to be picked. I take my first harvest as soon as I can in late May or early June and pick randomly with the aim of thinning the fruit and leaving the rest to swell and sweeten. I use these first berries to make jams and jellies; gooseberry jam is great with the addition of elderflower, strawberry & gooseberry jam makes the strawberry harvest go further, it is less sweet than plain strawberry and is my son's favourite- as is gooseberry and thyme jelly, which has a permanent place on the table with the Sunday roast. After my jam sessions, I take pickings whenever I need them through until late June or early July, when they become sweeter and almost grape-like, and use them for crumbles, puddings, ice creams (gooseberry and elderflower is delicious), or gooseberry fool. Any extras still hanging around as the raspberries and currants begin to ripen are pureed and frozen to be enjoyed during the winter.

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Growing your own is the only way to ensure a good supply, as gooseberries are rarely seen in shops, but in 18th century Britain things were very different. Gooseberries were so popular, with many different varieties and variety-specific recipes, that market gardeners were extending the season from early April and devising ways to keep berries on bushes until Christmas! Gooseberry clubs were also set up, mainly in Northern industrial areas and competitions held to see who could grow the heaviest fruit. These became so popular that ‘The Gooseberry Growers’ Register’ was started to record the results, and at their peak in the mid-19th century about 200 of these competitions were held, with 171 varieties of berries being named, many unknown today.

Popularity steadily declined and the onset of the First World War marked the end of the register. However a few gooseberry shows still exist; several take place in Cheshire around the village of Goostrey. The oldest running show (stopped only once, not because of WW1 but the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2001) is Egton Bridge show near Whitby, which held its first show in 1800. This year’s show will be held on Tuesday 4th August from 2pm where competitors will be trying to beat Bryan Nellist’s 2009 record breaking entry weighing 2.19oz or 62g (see www.egtongooseberryshow.org.uk for more info). This is about the size and weight of a medium sized egg! I don’t think I’ll ever be growing fruit in this league, especially with my lax pruning skills, but I’m pleased that I’m not the only one that thinks this small, green, hairy fruit is well worth celebrating and preserving. *Rebekah gardens in West Sussex.*