

## **Food ideas: Jams and winter vegetables**

September is a time of glut, when trees are laden with apples and pears, hedges are brimming with blackberries and wild plums, and marrows are still being offered by allotment holders to unwary neighbours. A really nice way of saving some of this bounty (well, maybe not the marrows) is to make jam with it.

Making jam involves mixing together roughly the same weight of fruit and sugar in a large pot; heating it to a high temperature – to a vigorous boil where the bubbles are climbing up the pot – for about 10 minutes, stirring very often; adding pectin if necessary; pouring the mixture into clean, pre-heated glass jars, sealing them, and letting the mixture set. The two main tricks involve the pectin and the hot jars.

Pectin is a gelling agent that occurs naturally in fruit, but in different quantities: apples, quince, plums and gooseberries have lots, but soft fruit like cherries and strawberries don't. For those fruit, and in case of doubt, it is best to use preserving sugar, jam sugar or liquid pectin, all of which can be bought at the Coop.

Any glass jar with a lid that seal can be used to store jam, although there are also some lovely specialist ones at Boswells. The easiest way to get the jars hot is to rinse them well, put them (not the lids, which might melt) into a cold oven, and turn the oven to a low setting for 10 minutes while the jam is boiling. If the jars are not hot, they might break when the hot jam is poured into them.

It is lovely to see a row of jars of freshly-made jam on the counter, with the light shining through them as if they were stained glass; and even lovelier to open one of the jars on a cold winter day, and remember the autumn day when the fruit was picked and the jam was made.

Although spring is the traditional season for sowing, there is still time to sow some vegetables for picking in late autumn or in early spring when there is otherwise little available in the garden. Oriental greens like pak choi, mizuna and mibuna can be used for stir fries or spicy salads. Winter radishes, bigger than regular ones and typically black or white, can be used in stews and soups. All of these are in the cabbage (brassica) family, so the seedlings will probably need to be covered with netting to protect them from pigeons. They are all ready to harvest 4-6 weeks after sowing, and so can still be used in late autumn if sown now. Leaf beet (chard), winter spinach and winter lettuce all grow slowly, and look quite ragged, over the winter months, and then grow rapidly in early spring. My favourite source for these seeds is the Real Seed Catalogue - [www.realseeds.co.uk](http://www.realseeds.co.uk). It is a family-run company based in Newport, and they only grow non-hybrid seed so that gardeners can collect seeds from their plants for use in the next year. Seeds from hybrid vegetables are either sterile or produce plants that are different from the parent plant.

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