

Autumn – My Favourite Season.

I was born in April and perhaps that is why Autumn is my favourite season of all. My mother was forever quoting the John Keats poem which begins:

SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

I hear her voice now as I check the tendril closest to each pumpkin to see if it has dried out, indicating that it is ready to harvest, as I carry in baskets of apples, nashis and tomatoes and line up shiny black eggplants beside zucchinis and capsicums. What a cornucopia of plenty and what a taste fest each meal is. For me, John Keats says it all.

While my mother was big on poetry, she did not preserve her harvests which were simply eaten or given away. We received jam from our neighbours. It was not until I met my husband that I knew anything about preserving bottles and the art of making jams and chutneys. My mother in law, like most women of her generation in the days before large domestic freezers, bottled fruit in Fowlers jars and for consumption in the winter. Careful arrangement of fruit and vegetables could be the difference between winning or losing in the bottling section at the church fair. For years we benefited from my mother-in-law's autumn industriousness until we branched out on our own and bought a very old second hand bottling kit. The instruction booklet included how to bottle mutton birds and rosellas. Reading the instructions revealed that rosellas are also a fruit, however 'catch and pluck the mutton birds' made it pretty clear that they are not.



Nowadays we preserve fruit and pasta sauce simply by bringing them close to the boil in a large saucepan and immediately putting them in to preserving bottles and sealing them. We also use other jars which have dimples in the lids because you can tell if they are sealed when the dimple is down and you hear a pop after about 20 minutes. Jars and bottles can be sterilised in the microwave. We try to create a year's supply of goodies and, following family example, give them to our children and grandchildren.

Tomatoes can be sliced and dried in the sun or the oven or, as we discovered, in a hot car. We put tomato pieces on cake racks on the dashboard with the car facing the sun. When they are leathery we mix them with olive oil and herbs and put them into jars – hey presto - gourmet sun dried tomatoes.

We have plaits of onions and garlics hanging in a dry dark place and will plant more garlic on the winter solstice. Six months later it will be ready. We have tried many methods of storing pumpkins and, although we know the secret of only storing perfect ones on a raised frame so that air circulates, we have never managed to keep them all in good condition. We have, however, managed to go a whole year without having to buy a pumpkin and happily gave the ones going rotten to our worms.



Keeping apples has been a challenge. Drying slices on cake racks set on top of our Coonara fire overnight was a great success, producing delicious dried fruit. We tried wrapping apples in paper and storing them in boxes but you need to check them often and

remove any that have started to rot. We have found that the ultimate place to store apples is in the fridge crisper but we will try in our cellar in the near future. If you have read the series of books that starts with 'Little House on the Prairie', by Laura Ingles Wilder, you will know how important preserving food was to our forebears, who pioneered new areas and were far away from shops. Today most people are not dependent on their own harvests but many people realise the health and wellbeing benefits of growing their own fruit and vegies. There is such a sense of satisfaction when, in July, you serve up a peach crumble and think back fondly to harvesting day way back in March.

Autumn is not only a time to harvest but also a time to plant. Put in garden plants so that they have a little bit of warmth to set them going nicely before they face cold weather. Remember to water them if dry weather continues. In the vegie garden, plant winter crops such as oats, peas or lupins to improve your soil – you allow them to grow and then dig them in or cut them down and leave as mulch, adding organic matter to the soil and aeration and pathways for water to penetrate when the roots rot. Pop in some carrots, lettuce, cabbage, Asian greens, silver beet, spinach and spring onions and include flowers such as calendula, dianthus, pansies, viola, snapdragons and stock to encourage beneficial insects and to provide colour and forms to confuse creatures that want to eat your vegies.



'Aren't those pomegranates gorgeous!'

Finally, Autumn is a time to savour. Take time out in every day to look for beauty and seasonal change and really enjoy this 'time of mellow fruitfulness'.

Happy gardening

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