



*Haslemere Herald column – September 2011*

## **Preserving our harvest**

With Haslemere holding its food festival and harvesting happening in the fields around, it is a good time to look at how we might preserve some of summer's bountiful produce.

With more people now growing their own fruit and vegetable,s or looking at ways to take advantage of seasonal food prices, there is renewed interest in traditional and modern methods of preserving food.

We are all used to having a freezer these days, but often we simply use to store products we buy already frozen. Freezing homegrown produce is quick and simple, but is not always the best or only way to preserve flavour, texture and vitamins. Also, some foods aren't suitable for freezing – lettuce or uncooked potatoes, for instance. However, if you are going to freeze your vegetables and other produce, there are useful techniques such as blanching that can help improve taste and texture.

People have been drying fruit, vegetables, herbs and meats since ancient times. Again, there are a variety of techniques appropriate to different foods that can improve the process, such as sun drying, air drying, smoking and baking. Our climate isn't ideal for drying, of course, but you can get relatively inexpensive dehydrators on the internet that will work for a wide range of foods.

Pickling is another method with a long history. Like many preserved foods, pickles have come to be enjoyed in their own right and are now produced to be eaten all year round. Cheeses are another example of where a preservation method has created foods that are now valued in themselves and not just something stored in a cupboard for the dark days of winter.

Vacuum packing is a modern technique popular with food manufacturers, but is now increasingly used by smaller producers. Small vacuum packing machines are now available at quite modest prices, making it possible to use the technique at home on a wide variety of foods. Vacuum packing can also be used in conjunction with freezing to extend storage life.

Then there are canning and bottling. Many people still make jams with the fruits of the summer – and marmalade in winter with Seville oranges – although canning is something of a lost art. However, like bottling, canning requires only relatively simple inexpensive equipment and some patience in order to capture the taste and colours of garden produce.

Finally, some foods don't require any special processing or treatment and can simply be stored appropriately to last a winter or more. Root vegetables were designed by Nature for this purpose. Potatoes, parsnips, carrots, onions and many others can often simply be left in the ground until they are needed – if pests aren't a problem. Otherwise they should be lifted, allowed to dry and then stored in a dark ventilated place.

For all these food preserving methods there is now a wealth of information on the internet, and many helpful books are also available.

One thing to remember, whatever method you choose – always label and date what your preserve. It's easy to forget just what you put in a package or can and when. And don't forget to eat the products by their 'use by' date.

Here are some useful links for further information:

[www.allotment.org.uk](http://www.allotment.org.uk)

[www.lovefoodhatewaste.com](http://www.lovefoodhatewaste.com)

[www.lowimpact.org/linkspreservingfood.html](http://www.lowimpact.org/linkspreservingfood.html)

Or go to the Transition Haslemere website: [www.transitionhaslemere.org](http://www.transitionhaslemere.org)

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