

Traditional and modern uses of orchard fruits and fruit trees

Teachers' Notes (KS2 - History & Science)

History of orchard fruits

The fruits generally grown in orchards across Britain are apples, pears, plums and damsons.

The fruits are native to Europe and Asia, so could be picked in the wild by early man. However, they were certainly under cultivation (in orchards) by the time of the Romans, who spread them throughout their empire. During the Dark Ages, there was a decline in fruit-growing in Britain; common people reverted to picking fruit from the wild as a supplement to farming. The knowledge and practice of fruit-cultivation became restricted to monasteries and the fruit gardens of a very few noblemen.



Interest in fruit in Britain increased after the Norman invasion and orchards were once again widely planted, including many new varieties imported from France. More new varieties were again introduced from elsewhere in Europe during the time of King Henry VIII. Then finally, during the Victorian age, the far-reaches of the British empire meant that fruits from all parts of the world were imported, exported and bred to create thousands of new varieties.

Traditional uses

Cider-making - apples are cleaned, pressed and the juice fermented*.

Cider-vinegar - leaving cider open to air, results in a slow conversion to vinegar.

Perry-making - Perry, or 'pear cider' is also made by pressing clean pears to give the juice which is then allowed to ferment* and produce alcohol and carbon dioxide



Fruit bottling - a domestic method of preserving fruit by putting in air-tight bottles (Kilner jars), boiling and then keeping; largely superseded by freezing.

Jam-making - another traditional method of preserving fruits. Plums and damsons make good jams. The fruit is boiled with sugar then put into sterilised jars and sealed.

Jelly-making - Crab-apple jelly is made in similar way to jam (above), but the boiled fruit and sugar mixture is strained (traditionally through muslin) before bottling, resulting in a clear preserve.



Baking - apples, pears, plums and damsons have long been made into cakes and puddings such as pies and crumbles. There are different 'eating' (dessert) and 'cooking' (culinary) varieties of most orchard fruits.

Toffee apples - traditional bonfire night treat!



*Fermentation is a naturally occurring process. Yeast, naturally found on fruit skins, acts on the fruit sugars and in the process, produces alcohol and carbon dioxide (bubbles or fix). The natural process can be speeded up by adding extra yeast or sugar.

Modern Uses

In addition to the traditional uses, many of which still continue, more recent uses, include -

Freezing - since freezers became commonplace in many homes, they provide the easiest way of keeping fruits for use later in the year.

Apple juice - not a new product, but since the introduction of pasteurisation, refrigeration and chemical preservatives, juice can be kept for longer without turning it into cider.

Smoothies - use mixtures of lots of different kinds of fruits, including orchard fruits such as apples, pears, plums or cherries.

