

THE WILD CRAB APPLE

HARVESTING SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER FOR THE
NOVEMBER WILD&SLOW



THE JUST-ABOUT COMPLETE, BEGINNERS GUIDE ON
WHERE TO FIND IT, WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE,
HOW TO PICK IT, HOW TO PREPARE IT,
AND HOW TO PRESERVE IT UNTIL NOVEMBER WITH
SUGGESTED RECIPES FOR ANY STALLHOLDER WISHING
TO PARTAKE IN WILD&SLOW



THE WILD CRAB APPLE

“An array of truly-fragrant apple-trees, a wood with its pink-tipped bloom” ⁽¹⁾

A native tree that in Irish Tree Lists was simply called *aball* (wild apple). The Latin name is *Malus Silvestris*.

In 10th Century England it was listed as one of the ‘Nine Herbs Charm’, here in Ireland it was listed as one of the seven ‘Nobles of the Wood’.

There is plenty of evidence that it was a prized food. Fergus Kelly states that the wild apple has no doubt been used as a food source since man’s first arrival in Ireland. ⁽²⁾ There was a distinction between the wild sour apples and the sweeter cultivated type; both were considered valuable.



Where to find Wild Crab Apple

Wild Crab Apples grow in woods, in scrubland, and in road and field hedgerows. It’s been a hedgerow plant at least since the 18thC so it’s common enough in country lanes and boreens.

What it looks like



It's a deciduous tree usually about 6-8m high. The bark is greyish-brown, and scaly; the leaves are broad and oval-shaped with serrated edges; the twigs are reddish-brown.

In May the flowers appear in clusters of about five, each on a short stalk. They are white with a pinkish tinge. When in fruit you cannot mistake it as it bears heavy crops of yellow-green fruit, some streaked, or speckled with red. The size of the apple can vary a good deal. It's been suggested that true wild crab apples are small and round and yellow when ripe and that the trees that bear larger fruits, may be descended from cultivated varieties (which were always grafted onto crab root stock) that have reverted to a wild form.





How to pick

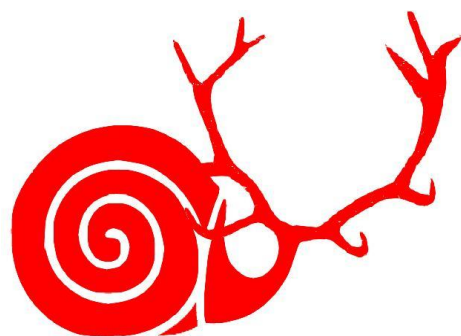
Depending on aspect and location, crap apples can be picked from early September right through to early November. Generally, most are at their best from the end of September to mid-October. Windfalls are fine whenever they appear. If you have a choice gather from a place free of traffic fumes. Take several baskets, and a walking stick to pull down the branches. If they are really ripe many will already have fallen to the ground. Always gather these first, unless they look too far-gone, or have been invaded by wasps or other wildlife that enjoys the fruit. When crabs are ripe sometimes shaking the whole tree, or a single branch, will bring them down. If you plan this method bring an old blanket and spread it under the tree.

How to prepare

All crab apples are scabby and ugly, a sign they have never been sprayed. Do not discard them on that account, as it matters not a whit. However do discard any rotten apples, all the leaves and twigs, and wash with cold water. They are generally cooked or processed without removing skin, core and pips. If not using at once store in one layer in a cool, dry, airy place.

Traditional uses

Crab apples are almost always far too sour to be eaten raw. Traditionally they were made into cider, wine, or low-alcohol apple juice and verjuice, which had widespread use in Europe before malt vinegar was invented. Crab Apple Jelly is delicious and a delicate pink in colour. Crabs have also been a valuable provider of natural pectin to enable fruits low in pectin to set to jelly, jam and chutney for yonks.





Preserving Wild Crab Apples

Apples can be preserved in many ways but they also store well just as they are. If you have a cellar or a similar frost-free but cold, dry place spread them out in plastic or wooden boxes, arranged in one layer so that they do not touch each other.

Since ancient times people at all ends of the well-defined social scale gathered and stored them for winter when they provided a valuable source of nutrients when other fruit and vegetables were scarce.

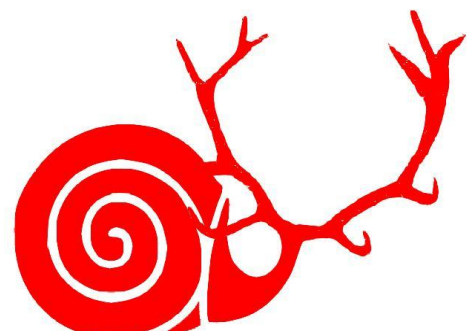
Crab apples are sour thus sugar features in many of the usual methods of preservation. Even cider made from crab apples alone, no matter how dry you like it, is probably going to need some sugar. Verjuice is an exception.

Preserving Wild Crab Apples by Drying

They can be dried as thin slices, small cubes or processed into a paste. All can be reconstituted when needed. Choose the largest ones. Peel, core and soak them and cut into slices, cubes or blitz. Lay out on racks. Dry at 60°C, or a little lower. Leave for three hours for slices and for up to three days otherwise. When they are hard they are ready to store in covered jars in a cool, dry place.

Wild Crab Apples as a Juice

Preparing the crab apples as a juice for preserves. Generally it is the juice that is needed for jams, jellies, butters and cheeses, syrups, and apple drinks. Unless you have an apple press, a juicer, or a strong-armed weightlifter at your disposal, this means cooking the apples. Take prepared apples (cut them in half if you need pectin) and place in a large pot with a little water. Simmer until soft. Strain through a jelly bag and measure the juice. If you are not ready to use it at once store in the fridge.





Preserving Wild Crab Apples with Sugar and Vinegar

Using crab apple as the single main ingredient in chutney is possible but unusual. Add onions and maybe some dried wild berries. Add zest with spices that have an affinity with apples: cloves, cinnamon, ginger, pepper, mustard seeds and chilli. Vinegar should be at least 5% acidity, which, together with any kind of sugar, will act as a preservative.

Preserving Wild Crab Apples by Fermentation

Cider and Apple Wine are traditional methods of preserving apples. You will need about 12kg of crab apples to give 5 litres of juice. The apples should be left on the trees as long as possible but not exposed to hard frosts. Then they should be shaped into a heap and allowed to mature for a few weeks in a shady frost-free place, before crushing or pressing.

Preserving Wild Crab Apples as a Fruit-Butter or a Fruit-Cheese

The traditional term "cheese" in the context of Preserves appears within a generation to have fallen into misuse. Curious, how a descriptive culinary term in use for many hundreds of years can be lost so quickly. However, in France and Spain and many other countries, quince and other opaque (as opposed to clear) jelly preserves are in everyday use and served with meat or with the cheese course. Quince is popular in Spain and Damson cheese is the traditional UK fruit for cheeses. Technically, a cheese or butter uses fruit pulp, while a jelly uses only the clear juice strained through a jelly bag.

Fruit cheeses and their near relative fruit butters are easier to make than jelly as there is less need for precision in when setting point is reached. They are simply boiled until thick and pulpy just like chutney. A 'Fruit-Butter' can be spread, while a 'Fruit-Cheese' is cut into slices with a sharp knife. Cheeses need to be stored in straight-sided jars so that they can be turned out. They are particularly useful when using fruits and berries that have a large amount of seeds, pips and skin that is difficult to remove before cooking.



Preserving Wild Crab Apples as a Verjuice

Verjuice is really a very slightly fermented sharp cider like liquid used in place of vinegar or lemon juice. The apples should be left on the trees as long as possible but gathered before the first frost. Take a bucketful of crab apples, find a reasonably clean, shady place to pile them in a heap. After 3-4 days, once they begin to sweat, sort them out, discarding stalks and any decayed, or rotten fruit. Return to your bucket. Next extract the juice. Strain through a jelly bag. Place in a bottle and leave stored in a cool place for at least four weeks before using it. Use in place of lemon juice in recipes. Think of verjuice as a gentle acidulant. It tastes tart, a bit like lemon juice or vinegar but not as harsh, great on salads or use as an alternative in recipes



Possible recipes that might be suitable for a stallholder at Wild&Slow

Wild Crab Apple, Pectin Stock

Many fruits and berries are low in pectin. Having a few litres of this in the store cupboard is sensible and makes making sweet preserves easy.

2kg **Wild Crab Apples**

1¼ Litre water

Cut the crab apples in halves. Put in a pot with the water and simmer gently for about 45 minutes or until pulped. Strain through a jelly bag and pour the resulting stock through a funnel into sterilised jars or bottles. Seal. Store in a cool, dry, dark place.

300 ml of the stock will set will set 4 Kg of any fruit that is low in pectin.

Wild Rosehip and Wild Crab Apple Jam

1kg Wild Rosehips, prepared

1kg **Wild Crab Apples**, prepared and any bruised parts discarded

1kg sugar

½ litre water

Note: You may wish to transform this into a spiced jam. Choose spices that have an affinity with apples such as cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, or allspice.

Place cleaned rosehips in a pot or ovenproof dish with the water. Cook gently at simmering point for 2 hours. Strain through a jelly bag.

Cut apples in half and cook in the rosehip liquid until soft. Pass through a food mill. Place the purée in a pot with the sugar and boil rapidly until setting point is reached. Pour into sterilised jars, cover, and store in a cool dry place.

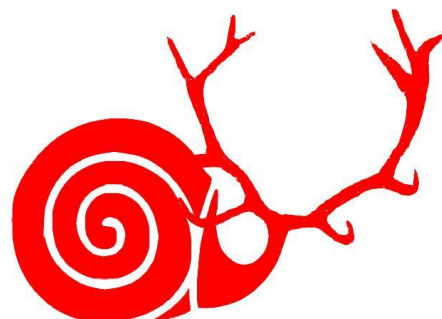
A Wild Crab Apple Jelly

2kg **Wild Crab Apples**, prepared

Water

Sugar

Cut crab apples in half. Place in a pot with just enough water to barely cover. Boil rapidly until the apples are soft. Strain through a jelly bag and allow drip overnight. Measure the juice and to each 1 litre add 1Kg sugar. Place, apple liquid and sugar in a large preserving pot, heat until sugar is dissolved. Then boil rapidly until setting point is reached. Skim carefully and pour into sterilised pots and cover.



A Wild Crab Apple Fruit Drink

This recipe is a spin on ginger beer and may contain a tiny amount of alcohol when matured. Based on a recipe from 'Wild and Free' by Cyril and Kit O'Ceirin.

4kg **Wild Crab Apples**, prepared

8 litres water

3-4 Kg sugar (or to taste)

3 lemons

3 inches fresh ginger

Note: You may wish to add a few whole spices such as cloves or a stick of cinnamon.

Crush the crab apples in a food processor or press in an apple press; place in a bucket and cover with cold water. Cover and allow mature for 2 weeks. Bash the apples every few days to release the juice. Strain the juice into a fresh bucket; add the sugar, lemon juice, ginger and other spices if using. Stir to dissolve the sugar. Siphon into demi-johns. You will notice some fermentation. When this has ceased and sediment has collected at the bottom and the liquid has cleared, siphon into screw-top bottles, leaving the tops loose for a few days. Do not prime with sugar as you would for sparkling cider. Store in a cool, dark place ideally for three months. This drink can be enjoyed diluted with water.



Wild Crab Apple and Wild Mint 'Butter'

1kg **Wild Crab Apples**

1kg sugar, warmed

800ml water

Juice of one lemon

A huge handful of Wild Mint, destalked and chopped.

Cut crab apples in half and stew in the water until soft. Strain. Put in a pot with the lemon juice and sugar. Stir until sugar is dissolved. Bring to the boil and continue stirring. This mixture splutters, so wear long sleeves and gloves. Continue until the mixture thickens. You can test if it is thick enough by spooning a little on a cold plate and allowing it to cool. If a skin is formed, it has reached the correct consistency for a fruit butter. Take off the heat and stir in the chopped mint. Taste adding more mint if you wish. Pour into sterilised jars and cover. Store in a cool dry place.

Note: You may, if you wish, cook until the mixture is thick enough to be a cheese. Just follow the instructions below. If you plan to serve this as a condiment with lamb or mutton, a cheese is a better choice.

Note: A similar butter can be made using different herbs such as sage, marjoram or thyme.

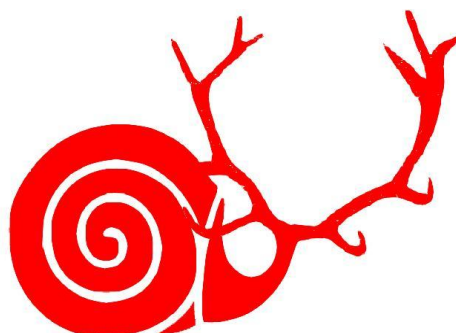
Wild Crab Apple and Wild Elderberry 'Cheese'

The Method for this recipe is taken from the original edition of Mrs. Beeton.

1kg **Wild Crab Apples,**

1kg Wild Elderberries.

Place fruit in an ovenproof pot and cook until completely soft. Mrs. Beeton suggests about 6 hours. Sieve or process through a food mill. Measure the pulp and add sugar according to your taste, roughly ½kg to each litre of pulp and the tartness of the crab apples. Boil, stirring frequently, until reduced and thick, and becoming stiff - when you stir and the mixture comes away from the sides. Pot, into straight-sided jars, or glasses. Cover and store in the usual way.



Spiced Wild Crab Apple, Onion and Wild Elderberry Chutney

1kg **Wild Crab Apples**

500g dried Wild Elderberries or 1 Kg fresh Elderberries

500kg onions, peeled and finely chopped

500ml wine or cider vinegar

500kg brown cane sugar, warmed

30g fresh ginger, grated

30g Pickling spice

Salt to taste

Cut the crab apples in half and cook in a little of the vinegar until soft. Pass through a food mill. In a large preserving pan, place the onions and a little vinegar and cook until soft. Add the crab apple pulp, spices, dried elderberries (if using fresh elderberries add these near the end of the cooking process), the remaining vinegar and the sugar. Simmer gently until the mixture has thickened. Taste and add salt if you wish. If using fresh berries add these now and cook briefly. The mixture is ready when a wooden spoon drawn across the bottom of the pot leaves a clean line. Decant using a wide-necked funnel into sterilised jars. Seal and allow mature for 3 months before opening.

Note: You may substitute sultanas for the elderberries. Spicing is a matter of individual taste, so feel free to vary the spices used, or the suggested amount. You may vary the amount of sugar to your taste.

Wild Crab Apple Cakes

125g Butter, softened

125g Sugar

125g Self-raising flour, sifted

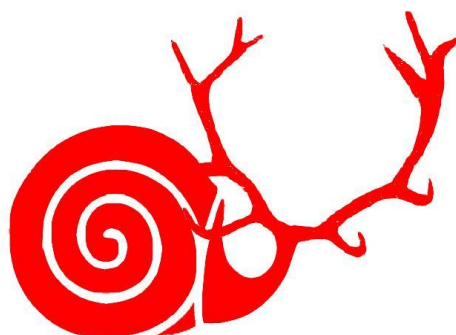
2 eggs, beaten

8-10 tsp Wild Crab Apple cheese, or Wild Crab Apple butter, or crabapple and elderberry jam

60g Wild Hazlenuts, chopped (optional)

Paper cake cases and a bun tin tray

Cream the butter and sugar until light and very fluffy. Add flour and beaten egg alternately until both are incorporated. Place the paper cases in a bun tray. Spread half the cake mixture in the bottom of 8-10 paper cases. On top of the mixture place a teaspoon of the crabapple butter and a sprinkle of the chopped hazlenuts. Top with the remaining half of the cake mixture. Bake at 180°C for about fifteen minutes or until risen and gold brown.





The Nitty-Gritty

Okay...so here's the nitty-gritty, but don't let it put you off! All twelve or so of these 'Wild Food Templates' for gathering and harvesting Wild Foods have been chosen because they are highly identifiable. It is always desirable for the first time forager to go out with someone who has experience.

However, as always, it is up to you to discern what to pick, how to harvest it and preserve it in a manner that would be in keeping with and fit for our ancestors.

Remember, if in doubt.... don't!

Disclaimer

For countless generations our forefathers/mothers gathered Wild Foods and it seems they did so pretty well...after all we're all still here! However modern protocol demands that we produce a disclaimer like this. So here we go.

The above plant images, although helpful, are not for identifying purposes. It is important to use a good guide, unless you are familiar with these plants. This post is only an introduction to the plants mentioned therein, and should not be relied upon in isolation. Foraging guides of reput should always be used, and one should always err on the conservative side, remembering, that it is important to read any guide together with any caution notes, and ultimately responsibility for your safety and those that you give, serve or sell these foods to, lies with you.

All information contained including various recipes are purely for illustrative and informative purposes only and ultimately it is the user that determines as to how the above mentioned Wild Food, might be used.

