

Blackberries and sloes are scarce but take your pick of rose hips

Sloe gin could be in short supply this Christmas as Keats's favourite season is falling short on the fruitfulness front. Not just for farmers and gardeners either: those of us who take to fields and country lanes in search of hedgerow bounty are having a thin time of it, with reports of blackberry-less brambles, bare trees and undersize fruits, as a correspondent to *The Daily Telegraph* noted yesterday, complaining of a lack of sloes, hawthorn berries and hazelnuts, too.

According to the Suffolk-based agronomist Mike Warner, the factors that stymied cultivated crops this year have done for the wild harvest, too. "We had a very dry spring, with late frosts that killed the early blossom. Then from March it rained continuously, with a cold wet flowering period knocking flowers off plants and stopping fruit setting."

Bee and insect populations have taken a hit, too, with the heavy rain, so pollination levels were low, adds Warner.

To make matters worse, the wet led to a rise in disease and mildew-type infections. If leaves get diseased they can't produce sugars through photosynthesis, so the fruit will be small and less sweet. Coupled with this, those heavy clouded skies that were a feature of the summer reduced the energy levels of plantlife, another factor in undersized fruits.

But pockets of the countryside have had reasonable crops, with the South East and East Anglia suffering less than the North and West of Britain. Miles Irving, the Canterbury area



If there are no sweet blackberries, try pickling the green ones

forager who supplies many of the country's top chefs including Richard Corrigan and Mark Hix, reckons it has been a great year for hawthorn and rose hips near him, although recent dry weeks have affected mushrooms and sorrel.

But 30 miles west near Tonbridge, cobnut farmer Alexander Hunt of Potash Farm has noticed a marked reduction in hips and haws, and far fewer wild hazels. "Hazels, walnuts and chestnuts are wind-pollinated, and the wet weather meant pollen from the male catkins couldn't travel properly."

Now, though, the lack of rain is the issue. "I'm looking at a hawthorn hedge, and it's looking parched. It's bone dry." His cultivated cobs have done fine, although wildlife, presumably finding supplies short in the hedgerow, have been raiding heavily. "We've never been ravaged by squirrels like it," he says gloomily.

At her home on the Welsh-Herefordshire border, Liz

Knight, who makes delights such as wild rose el hanout and pontack, a traditional Worcestershire sauce type condiment, for her Forage Fine Foods label, stocked in Selfridges and soon to be on the shelves of Fortnum & Mason, has noticed a marked decline in some forage plants. "There are trees that last year were so laden you couldn't pick them all, but this year might give you a kilogram of damsons or 500g of sloes."

She doesn't think the weather can take all the blame. "Wild plants that haven't been cultivated naturally have 'fat' years followed by dormant years."

So it's not all bad news for foragers, as long as they can be flexible. "We have loads of honeysuckle and elderberry this year. So we aren't doing damson jam, but I'll do elderberry things instead. There is lots of potential to experiment with less conventional flavours."

Her response to the miserable blackberries? Pickled green blackberries, adapted from an idea from Rene Redzepi, the Danish chef and co-owner of the renowned restaurant Noma in Copenhagen who has made foraging trendy among Michelin-star chefs. They are crunchy and, yes, blackberry-ish without the sweetness of the ripe fruit, and excellent with pâté or cheese.

And without damsons and sloes, the rose hips will come to the fore for chutneys and syrups that one might never have tried, had we had a perfect summer. Even this year's atrocious clouds have a silver lining.

Xanthe Clay

Rose Hip Chutney

- 1lb/450g rosehips, top, tailed and seeds removed
- 1 pint/560ml cider vinegar
- 1/2 lb/225g sultanas
- 1lb/450g cooking apples, peeled, cored and chopped
- 2 tsp grated fresh ginger
- seeds from 3 or 4 cardamon pods, crushed
- A shake of chilli sauce
- 1 lg clove garlic, finely chopped
- 1/2 lb/225g soft brown sugar
- Juice of a lemon and grated zest of half a lemon

Soak the rosehips, sultanas, and apples in vinegar overnight. Put ingredients in a large, heavy saucepan. Bring to a boil, then simmer, stirring occasionally, until mixture is thickened. You should be able to draw a spoon through it and see the base of the pan for a second before the chutney covers it again. Warm clean glass jars in the oven or dishwasher, then pot the chutney. Cover with plastic-lined lids, glass lids or waxed paper circles and cellophane. Store for a month before using.