

Tale from the Garden

Season's Eatings! As summer turns into autumn, September marks the beginning of heartier seasonal fruit and veg. Cauliflower and swede can be added to salads on warmer days and casseroles as the weather cools. Earthy wild mushrooms and dark Savoy cabbage make delicious vegetarian cooking simple, whilst sticky figs and deep red grapes can be baked into pretty puddings. From apples and juicy plums to colourful peppers and pumpkins, there are lots fruits and vegetables in season right now.

For plum-lovers, there's only a short window of opportunity to source locally-grown fruits. That's why **it's now or never** if you want to enjoy locally grown plums. They are only in season in the UK from mid-August to September – and it can take the trees about three years to bear fruit.

Low in calories, but high in essential minerals and vitamins, plums are a stone fruit that we just can't get enough of and are so easy to use in an array of baking and cooking recipes.

Growing plums on a tree can take a lot of time and attention. It also saps a lot of energy from the trees when they bear fruit and can take almost a full year for a plum tree to recover once it has produced a crop. The average gardener with a little space often turns his mind to fruit & the Victoria, that bastion of everything plummy in the orchard, is perfect. Perhaps the most well-known Plum cultivar, it's an orangey-red dessert plum that is ready to pick in August to early September. Victoria plums are self-fertile, which means you don't need two different plum trees to be able to produce fruit.



History relates the Victoria was discovered in a garden in the Sussex village of Alderton by a nurseryman call Denyer who originally named it "Sharp's Emperor". However, history does not record there was ever a Sussex village called Alderton. Most likely is that the plum was from the "Suffolk" village of Alderton where coincidentally lived the Gage family who had bred many plums. In 1838 Denyer changed his plums name to "Denyer's Victoria" which was the year that that particular monarch was crowned (28th June 1838). Six years later in 1844 it was introduced into Sweden where it became incredibly popular as a commercial variety, eventually finding its way back to our own orchards for reasons easily understood.

In 1913 according to the then Board of Agriculture, 17,000 acres of land were devoted to the growing of Plums on these islands, England accounting for 16, 418 of them. Worcester with 3815 acres, Kent with 3269 acres and Cambridge with 1577 acres. Middlesex, Bucks, and Gloucester just about accounted for the rest. Assuming the recommended standard close spacing (often underplanted with gooseberries) of 12-15ft was observed, that would give 250 trees per acre, each with an average yield of 2 bushel depending on the variety. The bushel was about 8 gallons dry volume (approx 1000 plums) and returned 6 shillings. This would have equated to a gross return of £150 per acre or by todays standard £9000 per acre even without the underplanted Gooseberry crop. The cropping potential of Victoria plums could be twice this so little wonder the variety became so popular.

There are over 2,000 types of Plum, making it the most diverse of the stone fruit. Originating in China, Plums have been cultivated by humans for thousands of years with some records even suggesting they had been eaten in the Neolithic Period, around 12,000 years ago.

MYTHS & LEGENDS

According to Chinese mythology, immortals fed on Plums to enhance strength and vitality. The Japanese believe the Plum is a protective charm against evil spirits and plant trees in the northeast of the garden, the direction from which evil comes.

Pershore in Worcestershire has its very own Plum Charmer who, in the Summer, plays music to plum trees to ward off spirits and ensure a bountiful harvest. The town is famous for growing plums and during the First World War, they sent tons of Plums by train to support the national food shortage. Great Western Railway thanked their effort by naming an engine The Pershore Plum.

It's now or never ... A young man wanted to attain spiritual enlightenment so he joined a Zen Buddhist monastery. The rules of the monastery were very strict. The young man's teacher put him in an intense training program as if he were a spiritual athlete, the young man was made to study and meditate for hours every day. Furthermore, the young student was to be silent 24 hours a day and 364 days a year. He was allowed to speak to his spiritual teacher only once a year and even then, he was allowed to say only five words.

At the end of his first year of study and silence the young student finally got to see his teacher. After careful consideration, the student's chose to say, as his five allotted words, "The food here is terrible." His spiritual teacher did not respond and the student returned to his little room for another year of solitude and study. The food did not improve.

At the end of his second year the student eagerly visited his teacher and spurted out his allotted five words, saying, "My bed it too hard." His teacher did not respond and the student returned to his tiny room for another hard year of silent study. His bed remained hard.

The third year was very grim for the student and when it finally ended he had his conference with his teacher and he told the teacher, "This regiment is impossible. I can't take it any more! I quit!"

His teacher replied: "I'm not surprised to hear you say that. All you've done since you got here is complain."

Imagine limiting yourself to only five words per year and then getting a chance to speak to someone you admire and tell them your five words. Imagine how alive you would feel when you finally got your chance to speak your words. Think of how focused in the moment you would feel. Your hands would be tingling from nervous excitement. Your heart would be aching for the opportunity to finally communicate what you have been thinking for the past twelve months. Perhaps that's exactly how you felt when, after all the restrictions of the pandemic had been lifted, you could once again meet up with friends & family ... and talk to them in person. You would come to that moment with a great sense of anticipation and laser-like focus. Extraordinarily gifted athletes and musicians speak of playing in "the zone." You would be in that zone when you came to speak to that person. The sense of aliveness you would feel in that moment is what Jesus experienced in every moment of his life and that is what he wants us to experience.

The young Zen student sought enlightenment. Many of us live much of our lives in a make-believe place called "the future." We are rarely able to enjoy the present because we are thinking about the future. However good the present moment may have been, we often throw it away and instead put our attention on all the possible problems we imagine we may encounter in the future.

Other people, perhaps you are one of them, err in the opposite direction. They live their lives in the past. Enlightenment means realising you can't change what's been. Those are words of wisdom for those of us who have trouble letting go of the past. Whatever it is from the past that keeps us from living in the present – we have to let it go. We can't change the score.

Our challenge is to live our lives neither in the future nor in the past but in the present moment. We have to learn to live one day at a time. That is the secret to success. Focus on the present moment. What are you lacking in this moment? Nothing. We lack nothing in the present moment. Focus on the present moment. Whatever you are doing, do it with all your attention. If you are driving, drive. If you are walking, walk. If you are praying, pray. Only this. Nothing more. That is what Jesus is teaching us now.

As Jesus puts it: "Be alert at all times." As it was for Jesus, so it is with us, **it's now or never**. We can't change the score. The past is gone and the future is beyond our grasp. All we have is this present moment. Let's begin this Autumn season with the intention to live each moment in "the zone," wide awake, in the moment, fully open to God. **It's now or never**. Those are the only two options we ever have. We choose now. We choose now. We choose Christ right now.

It's now or never!