



WHERE THE
WILD THINGS
ARE

Cotswolds mum and writer
ANDREA MYNARD goes foraging
for late spring elderflowers

HERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT the fragrance of elderflowers that's evocative of simple, traditional summer pleasures. It could be that the creamy flowers seem to spring up overnight in our hedgerows at a turning point in the cooking/gardening year. This freebie from the countryside festoons the land with its lacy flowers just as we start to enjoy gooseberries, asparagus and the first days of summer.

The scent and taste are stunning, and the health-giving properties of elderflowers and elderberries have long been known. This could be a reason why stories of elderflowers proliferate in folklore; the elder is reportedly the oldest herb cultivated by man, and it was often grown at the back door to ward off evil spirits. Rich in vitamin C, it was traditionally used as a detox and as a blood purifier, while reputedly relieving the symptoms of allergens to pollens.

Luckily, elderflowers taste great too. Their heady scent and stunning flavour can add a unique, summery note to cordials, homemade champagne, fritters and custard. Try adding a head of elderflower to gooseberries as you cook a compote, or steeping in milk/cream as you would a vanilla pod before making custard. Elderflower cordial has, of course, been popular in English country larders and village fêtes for years, while Italians blend the flowers with ricotta and spices to make tart fillings and fritters. Panna cotta is delicious flavoured with elderflowers, too, as is ice cream.

Picking elderflowers for culinary uses is best done on a dry, sunny day, as heat intensifies the scent and encourages the flowers to open fully. It's a great excuse for a summer meander across fields, dipping into our hedgerows when they're prettily decorated with these creamy flowers.

Once picked, leave the elderflowers on newspapers on a table outside, so that any insects can leave home. I know from experience that this is a good idea, having previously made a cordial which was suspiciously grainy. I've also learned from experimentation about the bubbles in elderflower champagne. Having suspected my first batch of not working, I was awoken from a doze one lazy Sunday afternoon by a bottle of very fizzy champagne popping open in the corner of the kitchen. Apparently, continued fermentation creates the carbon dioxide bubbles – and when bubbles build up inside sealed bottles they can explode! Refrigeration slows the fermentation enough to stop the build up of gas, so I'd recommend the fridge as a safe place for your homemade champagne.

Liz Knight of Forage, who has developed a cottage industry out of searching for wild ingredients in Herefordshire, recommends picking some of the buds just before the elderflowers appear to use in savoury dishes.

"The little tiny buds have an amazing texture and taste like smoked thyme," she says.



Elderflower heads are best picked on warm, dry days – it is then that they are most aromatic



Foraging is a great activity for the whole family – it can even turn into a business, like it did for Lucy Rollett's Nurses Cottage cordials

I've also picked up some great tips for using elderflowers from Lucy Rollett, who serves up her homemade elderflower cordial and potions from a fabulously retro, lime-green converted ice-cream van at food and music festivals and village fêtes across the region during the summer.

Lucy uses an old family recipe to make cordial in her kitchen in Little Comberton in Worcestershire. She was encouraged to develop her passion for foraging into a business after seeing her children's enthusiasm for lollies made from elderflower cordial, and now local organic farmers encourage Lucy to pick elderflowers from their hedgerows, with friends and family all chipping in to quickly harvest the flowers from nearby Bredon Hill.

Lucy adds elderflowers to her plum potion, a cordial which can be served warm in winter and blends cordial with local spring water to make elderflower presse. She recommends the delights of elderflower cordial added to whipped cream with fruit salads, and suggests adding a dash of elderflower cordial to a gin and tonic for a summery drink. When last summer turned out to be a bit colder and rainier than festival-goers hoped, Lucy recalls that elderflower cordial served hot was a bestseller and recommends trying this at home, as an alternative to fruit tea. She says it can be comforting if you have a cold, too.

"Elderflowers used to be known as the medicine chest of the countryside," she explains. "They're reputedly good for the respiratory system. Hot elderflower cordial with lemon added can be great if you are feeling under the weather."

Refreshing too, apparently: elderflower cordial also allows those partying hard to continue with their revelry! Dehydrated festival-goers often flock to Lucy's ice-cream van for a revitalising drink before continuing to enjoy music festivals.

All good reasons, I think, to start creating our own homemade goodies from elderflowers.

Get to know the experts...

* For further info on **Lucy Rollett's** elderflower drinks, visit www.nursescottagedrinks.co.uk

* To follow **Andrea Mynard's** blog about relishing a simple country life, visit www.shabbychick.me.uk

* For **Liz Knight's** foraging tips, head to www.foragefinefoods.co.uk

Elderflower *cordial*

30 elderflower heads, picked on a sunny day when fully open

60g citric acid

1,140ml boiling water

1.8 kg sugar

– Put everything into a large bowl (not metal). Stir twice a day for 5 days. Strain through a muslin and bottle in sterilised bottles, then dilute with fizzy or still water for a refreshing drink. Unopened bottles will keep for a year in a cool place, or freeze in plastic bottles.

Elderflower *champagne*

4 large elderflower heads

4.5 litres cold water

670g sugar

thinly pared rind and juice of 1 lemon

2 tbsp white wine vinegar

– Put everything in a big container and leave for 24 hours. Strain into bottles and keep for at least two weeks. It gets better for up to 1 year.

Elderflower *fritters*

110g plain flour

pinch of salt

2 tbsp English rapeseed oil, plus extra for frying

150ml water

8-12 elderflower heads

1 egg white

icing sugar, to decorate

– Sieve the flour and salt together and mix to a batter with the rapeseed oil and water. Allow to stand in a cool place for 1 hour. Beat the egg white until it holds stiff peaks.

– Fold the egg through the batter. Heat some rapeseed oil in a deep pan or deep fryer, dip the flowerheads in the batter and then drop into the smoking-hot oil and fry until golden brown. Drain on kitchen paper. Pile on to a dish, sprinkle with icing sugar and serve with lemon wedges and ice cream.

(feature)

