

For some reason the mere mention of sloe gin always conjures up strangely nostalgic images for me. Pictures of Wind in the Willows with Mole and Ratty toasting their little pink toes by the fire, glass of sloe gin in hand while they despair over Toad's latest exploits seem to spring to mind. Indeed making sloe gin does now seem to be largely a country pursuit with many people still regularly making a bottle for Christmas - as much part of their seasonal ritual as stirring the pudding and feeding the Christmas cake its weekly nip of brandy. In many Border villages, part of the New Year's Day celebrations include trying a sip or two of everyone's sloe gin or even sloe vodka with far too good a time being had by all - no wonder those canny Scots keep January 2nd as a national holiday!

Sloe berries, the fruits of the Blackthorn tree, are traditionally harvested in October or November. These little blue berries are part of nature's free and abundant autumn feast along with other hedgerow goodies such as rosehips, elderberries, hazelnuts and crab apples. Take heed though - the warning comes in the name - the Blackthorn is very prickly but a thick pair of gloves and a bit of determination should yield its fruits without too much trouble.

Once picked, the preparation of sloes is strongly surrounded by its own folk lore and superstitions. For culinary uses, the berries need to have been subjected to the first frosts of winter. In fact this is highly practical, as the cold is needed to break down the internal structure of the sloes and release their delicious juices. It's also a reminder that everything in nature has its place - while we might shudder at the thought of freezing temperatures, they're absolutely essential to deliver us sweet tasting roots and fruits. However with recent milder winters, frosts are coming later so the modern answer is to harvest the sloes when ripe and pop them in the freezer to stop the birds gorging on the berries before us mere mortals get a look in!

Sloes also need to be pricked, preferably before freezing; the traditional method is to use one of the thorns from the tree off which the berries have been picked. Legend also has it that if you use something as new fangled as fork then it must be silver, not metal. Having negotiated your way round these do and don'ts, possibly with tongue firmly in cheek, by far the best known use for this hedgerow fruit is sloe gin, a beautiful ruby coloured tipple that brings a warming winter cheer on the coldest of nights.

# let it sloe...

Sloe berries are the fruit of the Blackthorn tree and if you know where to look, you will find a gem of a berry for perking up a traditional winter drink. **Lisa Moore-Wilson** finds out what makes this pungent berry so special.

People often ask the question of what to do with the left over fruit once the gin is underway. The gin sizzled berries can be simply destoned and served with ice cream or mixed with melted dark chocolate, formed into rounds, left to cool and then served as petit fours. If you don't use all your harvest for your gin, sloes can also be used in jams and chutneys; in this case pay attention to the sugar content of recipes as eaten raw sloes are incredibly tart but are delightfully transformed with the correct amount of sweetness.

As we approach our first credit crunch Christmas for many years it's heartening to know that we can add a little warmth and cheer free of charge from our hedgerows - so make your guests welcome this year with a truly seasonal greeting! ■



Cut me out and keep me! ✂

## Sloe Gin Liqueur

### YOU WILL NEED:

500g sloe berries  
1 litre of gin (or vodka)  
400g caster sugar

1. Wash and dry the fruit then place into freezer bags. Freeze for a couple of days. This will help the berries burst to release their juices.
2. Pour the fruit into a demi-john or a large sealable glass container. Tip in the sugar and pour over the gin or vodka.
3. Leave in a cool dark place for 3 months, tipping the jar around to combine the ingredients every now and again.
4. After 3 months, strain the liqueur through a muslin cloth into clean and sterilised bottles.
5. This can be consumed now with nothing more than ice or a dash of tonic, soda or lemonade, but the liqueur will improve with age.