

## TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT



*Cowslips and may blossom, dandelions and elderflowers are too good to leave in the hedgerow, says Paul Hughes – it's time to start foraging. This is a fuller version of the feature published May 2014 in Eynsham News Issue 7.*

Once again we are faced with blossom and flowers in the hedgerows and the garden. At this time of year my mother would take me and my siblings out to collect elderflowers, may blossom and dandelions to make country wines. A strange thing to do as she was virtually teetotal (she once cleared a display of glassware with one swing of her handbag after a glass of sherry and had to be dragged out of the gift shop in a fit of giggles). She was a product of her time where as much as possible was grown at home and anything that was there for the picking invariably was – and used in as many ways as possible.

This policy of nothing goes to waste was put to the test last year, when I managed to knock the freezer door open and my batch of fruits defrosted. Faced with a sloppy collection of figs, damsons and cherries I threw them all into a bucket, covered with boiling water, stirred in some sugar and later some wine yeast then covered and left in the corner of the garage. Some time later I discovered the best rosé wine that I had ever made – crystal clear with subtle flavours of the fruit – it's been difficult to keep a few bottles back to mature.

I still stop and gather what the hedgerows have to offer and make something with them. The elder flowers go for making wine and elderflower lemonade. Some are dipped into a tempura batter and fried to a crisp, eaten with a dusting of sugar. Taking the flower heads off the dandelions around the garden to stop them going to seed gives an excuse to add them to water, yeast and sugar and ferment to wine. I'm not one to give out instructions, as many master country wine makers in the village would turn to drink if they saw my cloudy results gathering dust on the garage shelves.

However, the reason for writing this is to encourage everyone to try something different – take your children for a walk, pick the elderflowers, the elderberries and blackberries, check the internet for recipes and make some wine for the grown-ups and juices and cordials for the children as well as elderflower fritters and pies and crumbles.

Homemade country wines are not supposed to be like 'real' wine, they're to be enjoyed for the fun of harvesting, making and finally drinking. Some will be good and others not but all will change with time and often improve with age. My mother died when she was quite young and soon after, my father sold the family home. This came as a surprise to my youngest sister as she was still living there at the time. She soon found a room to rent and moved out taking with her our mother's wine collection. The cases covered an entire wall of her new bedsit, rising almost to the ceiling. Every so often we would get together and do some sampling. We tasted bottles of 25 year old elderberry wine, which looked and tasted like fine port (elderberries were used to bulk out port in days gone by). We sampled blackberry wines which would have given any Burgundy a run for its money and younger sparkling elderflower wine that was as good as any Cava. Sadly our dedication finally finished off the collection and mother's passion for country wines has faded into family history.