

# Time to gather the many treasures of autumn

**Now that it's autumn the squirrels seem to be on steroids.**

I watched a group of eight or more – they were moving too quickly for me to count – as they systematically stripped the big walnut trees outside the Ramsey Road Health Clinic, in St Ives, leaving the ground carpeted in green husks.

But these pirates don't have a map as they rush off to bury their treasure. They go for quantity and blanket coverage. This year autumn has given them a profusion of nuts – and, as a result of their over-catering, there may be forests of walnut trees in the gardens of St Ives next spring.

Although it's often a challenge to harvest any walnuts and hazelnuts ahead of the squirrels there's plenty more fruits and berries from the hedgerows that we can share. Luscious blackberries transform an everyday apple pie or make glistening jam or jelly. Elderberries make rich syrups, cordial or wine. And what is the Christmas season without a nip of sloe gin?

The blue-black fruits may be excruciatingly tart when raw, but, at their best after they have been frosted, and when infused with gin and sugar they become a

Bridget Flanagan, trustee of the Great Ouse Valley Trust, says this year has given us a new opportunity to savour nature's riches

veritable ambrosia (for adults only).

Sweet chestnuts are for roasting or to make an accompanying stuffing for meat. But my favourite food from the hedgerow is crab apple jelly. There's an alchemy in its making. The crab apples are an array of shiny reds, oranges, russets and yellow but are pulped into a thick dull sludge. When slowly strained through a muslin bag, a magical clear juice emerges. If you then boil to a jelly with sugar and spices – I prefer cloves and cinnamon – you have truly captured the 'golden apples of the sun'.

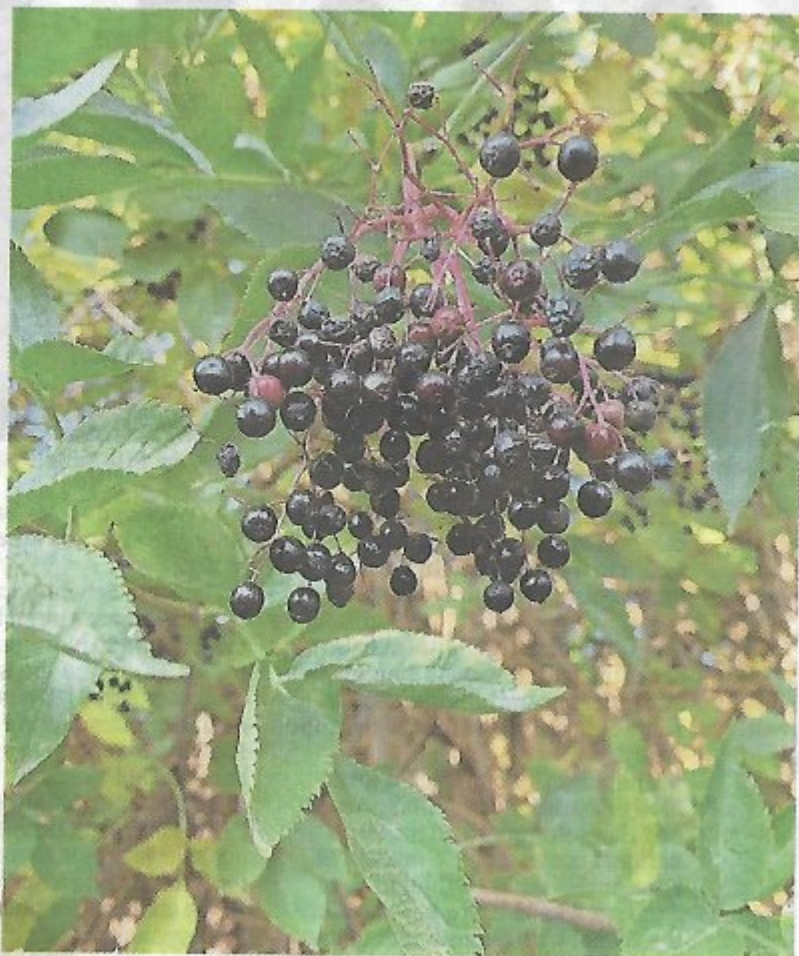
As we gather and savour the autumn riches we often feel a sadness that summer is over. This year I think we enjoyed our countryside more than ever. The numbers of people out and about in the meadows, on the river, along the banks and on the paths and byways was remarkable.

Suppliers ran out of new

bicycles, paddleboards and inflatable canoes and dinghies. For some of us it was a discovery, for others a rediscovery of the treasures of the countryside on our doorstep. It was an exceptionally beautiful spring and a lovely summer, and it was there for us in this time of crisis. The squirrels are oblivious to such sentiments, too busy making sure they have ample nuts for the winter. But I hope we value what we have – an abundance of natural riches.

**The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire.**

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Elderberries in the Great Ouse Valley.