Crab apples have only relatively recently been cultivated, but the range of cultivars is now vast. Their fruits range from the small, round, yellow Golden Hornet, barely bigger than a berry, to the enormous reddish-purple Wisley Crab, the size of a small Cox. John Downie, a medium-sized oval apple with yellow skin blushed with pink, is commonly held to be the best for jelly. To be honest we find any of the small to medium-sized fruits good (although juice yield from the smallest ones can be frustratingly low) and a blend is fine. Given the choice, we'd always favour the redder fruits because they make the most beautiful jelly, but the only ones to avoid entirely are the very large ones, which have a horrid dry texture, poor flavour and pathetic yield!

Crab Apple Jelly

Jelly is the most wondrous thing to make with your basket of crab apples. Whether plain or flavoured with herbs (see page 134) or lavender (below), a jar of jelly makes a fabulous gift, a delicious topping for your toast or will transform an ordinary roast. Caro’s children won’t contemplate roast chicken without it!

Makes about 8 large jars

2 kg/4½ lb crab apples, washed and roughly chopped
Approximately 900 g/2 lb/5 cups granulated sugar
Approximately 90 ml/3 fl oz lemon juice

1 The key thing when making jelly is not to be in a hurry! The first stage is the same whichever jelly you are planning to make with your juice, so it is quite sensible to cook and strain as many crab apples as possible and then freeze some of the juice for use at a later date. If you have a preserving pan you will be able to fit 4 kg/9 lb of apples in at once, so you can double up on the quantities above.

2 Simmer the crab apples in 1.2 litres/2 pints/5 cups water until the fruit is soft and mushy; this should take about 40 minutes. Tip the mixture into a jelly bag or a sieve lined with muslin (cheesecloth). Don’t press the mixture through or your jelly will be cloudy, but just leave it to drip into a large bowl for at least 2 hours or, preferably, overnight.

3 Measure the juice and pour it into a preserving pan or large saucepan. For every 400 ml/12 fl oz cups of juice, add 1.2 kg/2½ lb cups sugar and 40 ml/scant 1½ fl oz/scant 3 tablespoons lemon juice. Place the pan over a low heat and stir gently until all of the sugar has dissolved. Increase the heat and boil rapidly, without stirring, until setting point is reached (see page 10). Remove from the heat and gently skim any scum from the surface, using a slotted spoon. Pour into warm, sterilized jars and seal immediately.

Lavender Jelly

Lavender jelly, spread thickly onto scones or crumpets, is a glorious teatime treat. Follow the Crab Apple Jelly recipe above. Once you have removed the scum, add 30 g/1 oz lavender petals to the jelly and stir in. You will need to wait for around 30 minutes to let the jelly thicken slightly. Stir gently now and then and when the petals remain distributed throughout the jelly rather than rising slowly, it is ready to be filled into warm, sterilized jars. Seal immediately.

If apples were the very first fruit, then crab apples were surely the very first apples. Until recently, it was believed that all orchard apples were the product of hybridization between crab apples and Asian apples. More recent research has questioned whether in fact the domestic apple arrived in Britain in pip form in the stomachs of horses from Asia, possibly before even the Romans got here. Whatever the outcome of this investigation, wild crab apples have been common in England, Wales and southern Scotland for thousands of years. They are usually found in ancient woods and in hedges and have small to medium-sized, yellowy green or red and extremely sour fruits, which ripen between August and October, depending on location and the weather.