WW2 Garden Preserving Food



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Curriculum Links

Scotland

I can compare aspects of people's daily lives in the past with my own by using historical evidence or the experience of recreating an historical setting.
SOC 1-04a

UK

Events beyond living memory that are significant nationally or globally

Key Concept

I can learn about WWII preservation techniques by preparing vegetables for pickling and drying.



Background

During WWII, food was rationed, and the Land Girls helped preserve vegetables to ensure a steady food supply through winter. By learning preservation techniques, students will understand the importance of conserving resources, reducing waste, and planning for the future. This lesson will introduce basic vegetable preservation through pickling and drying methods that don't require fresh garden produce.

Resources

- Sliced root vegetables (e.g., carrots, cucumbers, radishes, or turnips from a store)
- White vinegar, salt, and optional spices (e.g., peppercorns, dill)
- Small jars or reusable containers for pickling
- String and cloth for drying (or a portable dehydrator if available)
- Clipboards and pencils for note-taking and recording steps

Wider Skills

- Environmental Awareness: Students learn about resource conservation and reducing food waste.
- Historical Understanding: Preservation techniques connect students to WWII homefront challenges.
- Practical Skills: Hands-on work with food preparation and preservation builds practical knowledge.
- Collaboration and Responsibility: Working together to preserve vegetables fosters teamwork and shared responsibility.
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Helpful Information

In the UK, many landladies contributed to the war effort by growing their own food as part of the "Dig for Victory" campaign. This government initiative encouraged people to turn every available green space into productive land to combat food shortages caused by wartime blockades. Landladies, alongside other citizens, played a significant role in growing vegetables and fruits to supplement their rations and help feed those they housed.

Here's how UK landladies contributed through gardening:
Growing Their Own Food: Landladies often converted their gardens, backyards, and even flower beds into vegetable patches. They grew staples like potatoes, carrots, cabbage, and onions, which were easy to store and essential to wartime diets.

Supporting Rationing: By growing food, landladies could stretch limited rations and provide meals for themselves, their families, and any lodgers or evacuees they housed. This self-sufficiency helped alleviate pressure on the national food supply and ensured that those staying in their homes had access to fresh produce.

Teaching and Sharing Skills: Many landladies shared their gardening knowledge with evacuees, particularly children from urban areas who might not have experienced rural life before. They taught them how to plant, tend, and harvest crops, fostering practical skills and contributing to morale by giving evacuees a sense of purpose.

Community Gardens and Allotments: In some cases, landladies worked in community allotments where multiple households contributed to growing food. This not only increased food production but also built community resilience and fostered relationships between neighbors.

Preserving and Storing Food: Alongside growing crops, landladies learned food preservation techniques like pickling, canning, and drying to make the most of their harvests. This was crucial for providing sustenance during winter months when fresh produce was harder to come by.

Boosting National Morale: The “Dig for Victory” campaign was as much about morale as it was about food production. Landladies’ participation in growing food contributed to the collective effort and demonstrated self-sufficiency, resilience, and patriotism, all of which were celebrated qualities during wartime.

In short, UK landladies who participated in food growing were essential to sustaining the nation’s food supply during WWII. By making their homes more self-sufficient and teaching practical skills, they provided valuable support on the home front, contributing to the survival and well-being of the people they sheltered and the broader community.

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Helpful Information

During WWII, UK landladies and households involved in the "Dig for Victory" campaign grew a range of hardy, nutritious crops that were relatively easy to cultivate and suited to the British climate. These included:

Potatoes: A staple crop due to their versatility, high yield, and calorie content. Potatoes were used in numerous dishes and stored well over the winter.

Carrots: Known for their nutritional value and adaptability, carrots were used in everything from stews to "mock" recipes (e.g., mock apricot jam made with carrots).

Cabbage and Other Leafy Greens: Cabbage, kale, and spinach were essential for their vitamin content, especially vitamin C, and were used in soups, stews, and side dishes.
Onions: Valued for flavor and easy storage, onions were essential in wartime cooking to add depth to otherwise bland, rationed meals.

Beetroot: This root vegetable was popular because it could be boiled, pickled, or used in salads, and it stored well for extended periods.
Turnips and Swedes: These hardy root vegetables could withstand colder weather, making them ideal for the British climate. They were commonly used in soups and stews.

Broad Beans and Runner Beans: Beans were valuable for their protein content and ease of cultivation. They could also be dried for use in winter.

Parsnips: Similar to carrots, parsnips were easy to grow and versatile. Their natural sweetness made them a favorite for roasts and soups.

Leeks: Often used in soups and stews, leeks could be grown through the winter and were an excellent addition to many dishes.

Rhubarb: Though technically a vegetable, rhubarb was used in desserts and preserves, adding a touch of sweetness to the limited wartime diet.

Herbs: Simple herbs like parsley, thyme, and rosemary were grown to add flavor to meals, making limited ingredients more enjoyable.

These crops not only supplemented the rationed diet but also provided essential vitamins and minerals that helped maintain health during wartime. The focus was on high-yield, nutritious plants that were easy to grow, store, or preserve. This made homegrown produce a crucial part of the UK's food strategy and helped boost morale by fostering a sense of contribution and resilience among those on the home front.

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Helpful Information

In November, as colder weather set in, UK landladies and other home gardeners focused on preparing for winter and making the most of any remaining crops. Here's what they typically would have done in their gardens during November:

Harvesting Late Crops: November was the last chance to harvest hardy crops like carrots, parsnips, leeks, cabbage, and brussels sprouts. These vegetables could withstand light frosts, so they would have been left in the ground until needed.

Storing Root Vegetables: Root vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, and parsnips were stored in cool, dark, dry places, like cellars or pantries, often packed in sand or straw to prevent them from rotting. This storage extended their usefulness through the winter months.

Clearing Spent Plants: November was also a time to clear the garden of any plants that had finished their growing season. This cleanup helped prevent diseases and pests from overwintering in the soil.

Composting and Soil Preparation: Landladies and gardeners would have collected plant debris, fallen leaves, and kitchen scraps to add to compost heaps. This compost would decompose over winter, providing nutrient-rich soil to use in the spring.

Planting Overwintering Crops: Hardy crops like broad beans, garlic, and certain varieties of onions were planted in late autumn. These crops would establish roots over winter and start growing as soon as the weather warmed in early spring.

Protecting Plants from Frost: Tender plants and any remaining vegetables were often covered with straw, cloches (small glass or plastic coverings), or makeshift coverings like sacks or blankets to protect them from frost.

Caring for Perennials: November was a good time to prune perennial plants, such as rhubarb crowns, which could be divided and replanted. Landladies might also have mulched strawberry plants and other perennials to protect them from frost and ensure they came back strong in the spring.

Preserving Late Harvests: Any surplus produce, like cabbage or root vegetables, was preserved through pickling, drying, or canning. Pickled vegetables were popular and provided a source of vitamins and variety over the winter.

Planning for Spring: Gardeners often spent time in November planning next year's garden, deciding which crops had been most successful and choosing what to grow again. Many would save seeds from this year's crops to plant the following season, reducing reliance on external sources.

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Winter Green Manures: Some would plant green manure crops, like winter rye or clover, which were plowed into the soil in spring to increase fertility. This helped prepare the soil for future planting without relying on store-bought fertilizers, which were scarce during wartime.

In short, November was a month of preparation, storage, and protection in the garden, helping ensure that there would be food available through the winter months and that the soil would be ready for planting again in the spring. These practices were essential in keeping food supplies steady and contributed to the self-sufficiency that was crucial during WWII.

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Lesson

Introduction (10 minutes):
Gather students outdoors to introduce the importance of food preservation during WWII. Explain how, without refrigerators, people used methods like pickling, drying, and canning to keep food edible over long winters. Discuss the role of the Land Girls in ensuring food was not wasted and was available during shortages.

Vegetable Preservation Activity (20 minutes):
Part A: Pickling

1. Preparing Vegetables for Pickling: Give each student a few slices of root vegetables. Show them how to sprinkle a little salt on the vegetables to draw out moisture and explain that this process helps preserve the vegetables.
2. Creating the Brine: In a small container, mix white vinegar with optional spices like peppercorns or dill for flavor.
3. Filling the Jars: Students add their salted vegetables to small jars, then pour vinegar over them until covered. Discuss how vinegar's acidity helps prevent bacteria from growing, making the vegetables last longer.
4. Sealing and Storing: Encourage students to screw the lids tightly, explaining that these pickles will be ready in about a week and can be stored for months. They can take the jars home as a personal preservation project.

Part B: Drying

1. Preparing Vegetables for Drying: Give students small slices of vegetables, such as carrots or radishes. Explain that during WWII, vegetables were often dried because it reduced moisture, preventing spoilage.
2. Outdoor Drying (or String Drying): If it's a dry day, have students spread vegetable slices on cloth in a sunny outdoor spot. Alternatively, they can string slices on a thread to hang in a dry area. If you have a dehydrator, place some slices in it as a demonstration.
3. Observing the Drying Process: Explain that this process takes a few days, and they'll need to check on the vegetables daily to ensure they're drying fully. Dried vegetables can be rehydrated for soups and stews, just as people did during the war.

Reflection and Discussion (10 minutes):
Gather students in a circle to discuss the preservation process. Use guiding questions like:

- How does pickling or drying change the way the vegetables look and feel?
- Why might preservation have been so important during WWII?
- How can we use these techniques to prevent food waste today?

Encourage students to reflect on how preserving food connects us to the past and teaches sustainability.

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Assessment

Observation:

- Task Engagement: Observe students' participation in the preservation process, noting their care in handling and preparing vegetables and their engagement with the brining or drying steps.
- Collaboration: Assess students' ability to share resources, take turns, and work together in preparing the vegetables for preservation.

Reflection Responses:

- Understanding of Preservation Techniques: Listen for understanding in students' reflections, such as their recognition of why vinegar and drying reduce spoilage and how preservation was important in WWII.
- Linking to Sustainability: Evaluate if students make connections between historical preservation techniques and modern sustainability. Look for insights like "we can save food for longer" or "we waste less this way."

Final Products:

- Pickle Quality: Assess each jar to ensure students followed steps carefully (e.g., covered vegetables with vinegar). Observing their attention to detail here can indicate comprehension.
- Drying Process: If drying vegetables are revisited over several days, monitor students' engagement with checking on and recording the progress. Full, dry slices demonstrate patience and understanding of the drying process.

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Younger Classes

For younger students, simplify the preservation process to just exploring vinegar and salt on vegetables and observing what happens over time. Allow them to handle and taste the fresh vegetables, then see how they change once pickled.

- Simple Pickling Exploration: Pre-fill small jars with vinegar, letting children add a few vegetables and observe how the vegetables change color and texture.
- Drying through Observation: Instead of handling dried vegetables, younger children can observe vegetables strung up by adults and talk about how they feel before and after drying.

This adaptation introduces basic concepts of change and time, focusing on sensory experiences rather than the preservation method's practical use.

Older Classes

Older students can engage with the scientific aspects of preservation, including understanding pH levels and bacterial growth in food preservation. They can also research WWII preservation methods and compare them to modern techniques.

- Experiment with pH Levels: Show students how vinegar's acidity impacts preservation by testing pH with strips, discussing how low pH levels prevent bacterial growth.
- Extended Research on WWII Preservation: Assign research on additional preservation techniques used in WWII, such as salting meat or canning. They can present their findings in small groups.

This adaptation encourages deeper scientific understanding and connection to historical methods, expanding knowledge beyond the basic preservation techniques.

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Basic Pickled Carrots

Ingredients

- Carrot slices (about 1 cup)
- 1 cup white vinegar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon sugar (optional)
- Optional spices: ½ teaspoon peppercorns, 1 clove of garlic, or a few dill sprigs

Instructions

1. Add the carrot slices to a clean jar.
2. In a separate container, mix the vinegar, salt, and sugar until dissolved.
3. Pour the vinegar mixture over the carrots, ensuring they are fully covered. Add optional spices if desired.
4. Seal the jar and refrigerate. Pickles will be ready to eat in 1 week and can last for up to a month.

Salt-Preserved Radishes

Ingredients

- Radish slices (about 1 cup)
- 1 tablespoon salt

Instructions

1. Place the radish slices in a bowl and sprinkle with salt.
2. Mix thoroughly so that the salt covers all the slices.
3. Let the radishes sit for about 30 minutes, then gently squeeze to remove excess liquid.
4. Pack the salted radishes into a jar. They will keep in the refrigerator for up to 1 month and can be used as a tangy snack or topping.

Dried Vegetable Chips

Ingredients

- Thinly sliced root vegetables (carrots, parsnips, or beets)
- A sprinkle of salt

Instructions

1. Spread the vegetable slices on a clean cloth or drying rack in a sunny spot outdoors.
2. Sprinkle with salt to help draw out moisture.
3. Allow the slices to dry for 2-3 days, turning them daily to ensure even drying.
4. Once fully dried and crisp, store in an airtight container. Rehydrate as needed or enjoy as crunchy snacks.

Sweet and Sour Pickled Onions

Ingredients

- 1 cup pearl onions or sliced onions
- ½ cup white vinegar
- ¼ cup water
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Optional spices: 1 bay leaf, ¼ teaspoon mustard seeds

Instructions

1. Peel and prepare the onions, placing them in a clean jar.
2. In a pot, combine vinegar, water, sugar, salt, and any optional spices. Bring to a gentle boil.
3. Pour the hot mixture over the onions until they are fully submerged.
4. Seal the jar and let it cool. Refrigerate and enjoy after 3-5 days; they'll last up to a month in the fridge.

Apple Vinegar for Pickling

Ingredients

- 2 cups chopped apple peels (from leftover apple slices or cores)
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- Water to cover

Instructions

1. Place apple peels in a clean jar and cover them with water, leaving a little room at the top.
2. Add the sugar and stir until dissolved.
3. Cover the jar with a cloth and secure with a rubber band. Leave in a warm spot for 1-2 weeks, stirring daily.
4. After about 2 weeks, strain out the apple peels and transfer the vinegar to a bottle. This apple vinegar can be used in pickling recipes or as a flavor enhancer.

Traditional Piccalilli Recipe

Ingredients

- 1 cup cauliflower florets
- 1 cup diced carrots
- 1 cup diced cucumber or courgette (zucchini)
- 1 cup diced green beans
- ¼ cup salt
- 1 ½ cups white vinegar
- 1 tablespoon mustard powder
- 1 tablespoon turmeric powder
- 1 tablespoon cornflour (cornstarch)
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 tablespoon sugar

Instructions

Place the cauliflower, carrots, cucumber, and green beans in a large bowl.
Sprinkle the salt over the vegetables and mix well.
Cover the bowl and leave the vegetables to sit overnight, or for at least 6-8 hours. This draws out excess moisture and helps keep the vegetables crunchy.

Preparing the Piccalilli Sauce

Rinse the salted vegetables in cold water to remove excess salt, then drain well.
In a saucepan, bring the vinegar to a boil, then reduce to a simmer.
Add mustard powder, turmeric, ground ginger, and sugar to the vinegar, stirring to dissolve.
In a small bowl, mix the cornflour with a bit of water to make a paste, then add it to the vinegar mixture to thicken the sauce. Stir continuously until the mixture becomes smooth and thick.

Combining Vegetables and Sauce

Add the drained vegetables to the saucepan with the spiced vinegar mixture, stirring well to coat all the pieces evenly.
Simmer the mixture for 5-10 minutes, allowing the vegetables to soften slightly while still keeping a bit of crunch.

Storing the Piccalilli

Spoon the hot piccalilli into sterilized jars, pressing down to ensure the vegetables are fully submerged in the sauce.
Seal the jars and allow them to cool. Store in a cool, dark place for at least a week before eating to allow the flavors to develop (piccalilli tastes best after a few weeks).
Once opened, store in the refrigerator. The sealed jars will last for several months.