

get  
fit

eat  
well

enjoy  
life!

with uncle chris

# EAT PURPLE, PEOPLE!

## They contain powerful anti-oxidants

Hello folks

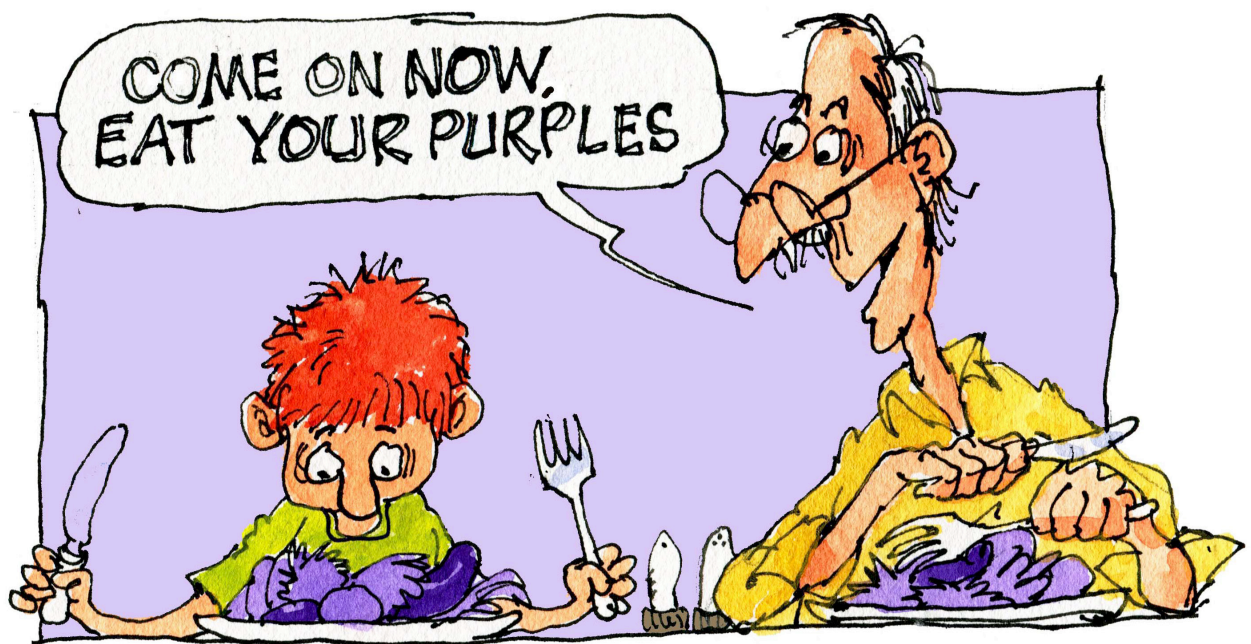
I'm casting my mind back a bit... ah, yes 1984. The year that most of you were not even a blip on the parental landscape. But I was on this mortal coil – in my youth – and I do recall the song, and the album, of that once famous muso – Prince. In that year he performed *Purple Rain* and the album has since sold 25 million copies

world-wide, one of the biggest success stories in the world of recording.

But what did the lyrics mean? Who cares? So it rained down purple ... and what have we today, some 40-odd years later – is a healthy fascination for purple veges and fruit.

Psychedelic purple in shades of red and blue, but purple nevertheless. Veggies and fruit, with purple skins and, usually, purple hearts. Blueberries, eggplants and acai berries, grapes (not the green varieties), that hearty version of cabbage (some claim it's red) and more recently, due to public demand, varieties of carrots, asparagus, sweet potato, cauliflower and queen garnet plums ... they're all included on the pro-purple list. Even red-leaf lettuce, figs, passion fruit, cherries and pomegranates are considered part of the purple good guys.

What do these veges and fruit have in common? Well, they contain anthocyanins, which are red, blue



and purple natural pigments. These anthocyanins are very good for your body. They contain powerful antioxidants and could boost the immune system.

The 'A' word (I have trouble spelling it) is a subset of the chemical known as flavonoids. Nutritionists claim 'A' could help lower the risk of blood pressure, diabetes and dementia.

In America a recent Harvard University study, which looked at more than 93,600 women aged between 25 and 42, found those who ate a half cup of blueberries and strawberries three times a week were 34% less likely to suffer a heart attack than women who didn't.

But I'm no medical guru. You might want to book an appointment with Dr Google! Basically I just enjoy what I cook, and the colour purple can visually, as well as nutritionally, enhance a meal.

Woolies nutritionist Monique Cashion says purple produce sales have noticeably

increased in the past few years.

"Purple produce has some powerful properties," she says. There are so many emerging health benefits of 'A' – including that they are anti-inflammatory, can support the immune system and help our gut health.

"They are low in calories, high in nutrients and provide dietary fibre, which naturally protects the heart."

A last word from the American Cancer Society:

"Purple foods contain important nutrients called anthocyanins, which protect against cell damage from free radicals.

"Eat fruits and vegetables of different colours – yellow, orange, blue, red and purple. Generally, the more colourful the fruit or vegetable, the more nutrients it contains along with cancer-fighting properties, oxidants."

So go to it, fellow purple people eaters!

# STRETCHING OUT the festive season

By the time you read this, your Christmas dinner may well be over. But throughout the summer season legs of ham and the occasional turkey can make fine fare. And of course once Christmas is over there always seem to be surplus of hams especially at such a great price. Here I offer three glazes for your ham and three great stuffings for the turkey, free-range of course.

## Glazed leg of ham

½ leg ham, shank end (about 3 ½ kg)  
30-40 whole cloves

Preheat oven to 180°C. Line a large baking pan with baking paper and add 1 cup water.

Use a sharp knife to cut around ham shank, about 10cm from the end.

Carefully lift off the rind in one piece, separating skin from the fat by working your fingers between the layers. Score a shallow diamond pattern in the fat (not deep down to the meat) evenly with a small, sharp knife, maintaining an even depth all over. Stud with cloves.

Place ham in a pan and wrap shank with foil. Generously brush a glaze all over, using about one-third of your choice of glaze.

Bake for 1 hour 30 minutes, brushing with remaining glaze every 15 minutes, or until deep golden. Transfer to a platter. Cover with foil. Set aside to rest for 30 minutes before carving.



### HAM GLAZES

#### Lime and macadamia

1 1/3 cups lime marmalade  
1 cup firmly packed brown sugar  
1 tablespoon dijon mustard  
200 g roasted and salted macadamias, chopped

Put marmalade, sugar and mustard into a pot over a medium heat. Cook stirring, until sugar dissolves and mixture comes to the boil. Reduce heat and simmer and cook for 15 minutes or until thickens slightly. Stir in the nuts, then cool slightly and use as recipe above suggests.

#### Quince

100 g tub quince paste, roughly chopped  
2 tablespoons maple syrup  
1 tablespoon brandy  
2 teaspoons white wine vinegar  
2 teaspoons wholegrain mustard

Place quince paste, maple syrup, brandy and vinegar in a small saucepan over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring, for 5 to 6 minutes or until combined and paste has melted. Remove from heat. Stir in mustard.

#### Red currant and balsamic

½ cup red currant jelly  
½ cup firmly packed brown sugar  
1 tablespoon dijon mustard  
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

Combine jelly, sugar and vinegar in a small saucepan over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring for 5 to 6 minutes or until combined and paste has melted. Remove from heat. Stir in mustard. Then baste the ham after scoring.

#### Maple syrup and orange

½ cup maple syrup  
½ cup orange juice  
½ cup orange marmalade

Combine the maple, orange juice and marmalade in a small saucepan over medium heat. Heat, stirring for 10 minutes until mixture thickens. Remove from the heat. Set aside ready to baste your ham.





## Roast turkey

4–4.5 kg free-range turkey  
olive oil  
2 heaped tablespoons plain flour  
1.2 litres organic chicken stock  
1 tablespoon cranberry sauce or  
cranberry jelly  
red wine vinegar  
5 rashers of streaky bacon  
½ bunch of fresh rosemary  
150 g unsalted butter, at room  
temperature  
sea salt and pepper

Around 30 minutes before you are ready to cook, remove the turkey from the fridge and allow it to come up to room temperature. Preheat the oven to 220°C.

To make the bacon butter, roughly chop the bacon and place in a food processor. Pick half the rosemary leaves. Pulse everything together until finely chopped, cube and add the butter and a good pinch of sea salt and black pepper, then pulse again to combine.

Wipe the turkey inside and out with paper towel, then place on a chopping board with the neck-end facing you. Find the edge of the skin that's covering the breasts and gently peel it back. Work your fingers, then your hand under the skin, freeing it from the meat – if you're careful, you should be able to pull all the skin away from the meat, keeping it attached at the sides. Work slowly and try not to make any holes in the skin.

Using a spatula, spoon most of the flavoured butter between the skin and the breast, tucking the flap of skin underneath to stop the butter leaking out, then rub the remaining butter all over the top of the bird.

Transfer the turkey to a large roasting tray, drizzle with oil and season well. Immediately turn the heat down to 180°C, then roast for 20 minutes per 500g, or until the juices run clear when the thigh is pierced with a knife. Baste

the bird with the cooking juices every 30 minutes or so. Once cooked, move the turkey to a board, cover loosely with foil and leave to rest for around 1 hour (don't throw the juices out). When the resting time is almost up, prepare the gravy.

Skim and discard the surface fat from the juices in the roasting tray. Place the tray over a medium heat and stir in the flour. Keep stirring, until the flour has turned the colour of peanut butter and is sticky and lumpy, then leave to cook for a few minutes. Pour in the stock and gently bring to the boil, stirring regularly. When it starts to bubble, reduce the heat to a simmer for 5 minutes, or until thickened. Stir in the cranberry sauce and a splash of red wine vinegar and season to taste. Sieve the gravy, pushing through all the goodness with the back of a spoon, and pour into a jug.

Carve the rested turkey, then serve with the gravy and all the usual trimmings.

## TURKEY STUFFINGS

### Cranberry and sage

2 tablespoons olive oil  
2 brown onions, diced  
2 garlic cloves, crushed  
280 g fresh breadcrumbs  
¼ cup sage leaves, chopped  
150 g dried sweetened cranberries  
1 tablespoon orange zest  
50 g butter, melted

Heat the oil in a large frying pan over medium heat. Add onions and garlic and cook 8–10 minutes until softened. Remove from the heat, add the breadcrumbs, sage, cranberries, orange zest and butter and stir until well combined. Set aside for stuffing turkey.

### Pistachio, bacon and fig

1 teaspoon olive oil  
4 rashers streaky bacon, thinly sliced  
4 slices day-old sourdough bread, crusts removed, torn  
½ red onion, diced  
2 garlic cloves, crushed  
6 sprigs thyme, leaves picked  
¼ cup pistachios, chopped  
5 soft dried figs, roughly chopped  
1 tablespoon wholegrain mustard  
50 g chilled butter, chopped

Heat oil in a frying pan over a medium-high heat. Add bacon and cook, for 4–5 minutes or until golden brown. Drain on paper towel. Add onion, garlic and thyme to the pan and cook slowly until onion is translucent.

Place bread in a food processor and process until coarse crumbs form. Then add onion mix, pistachio, fig, mustard, butter and bacon. Process until well combined.

### Lemon and pine nuts

125 g butter, chopped  
2 red onions, finely diced  
2 teaspoons ground cumin  
½ cup currants  
5 cups fresh breadcrumbs  
½ cup pine nuts, toasted  
3 large lemons, zested  
½ cup flat leaf parsley, chopped  
sea salt flakes and ground black pepper

Melt butter in a frying pan over a medium heat. Add onions and cook, stirring for 10 minutes until soft. Add cumin and currants and cook, stirring for 2 minutes.

Transfer mixture to a large bowl, add breadcrumbs, pine nuts, zest and parsley. Season with salt and pepper and mix until combined. Set aside to cool.

Preheat the oven to 180C, press the stuffing into a 5 x 9 x 18cm greased and lined loaf tin. Bake for 30 minutes or until firm in the centre. Turn out on to a platter and slice.

## Stuffed pork loin roast

2 kg boneless pork loin roast  
75 g butter  
1 onion, diced  
1 garlic clove, crushed  
2 cups stale breadcrumbs  
2 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted  
1 tablespoon chopped fresh sage  
1 tablespoon chopped continental parsley  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
sea salt and cracked black pepper

Preheat oven to 220C. Place a rack in roasting pan.

Melt butter in a large frying pan over medium heat. Add onion and garlic and cook for 4 minutes, stirring occasionally, or until softened. Remove from heat. Stir in breadcrumbs, pine nuts, sage and parsley. Season to taste. Set aside to cool.

Place pork on chopping board. Remove string. Using a sharp knife, score rind crossways. Unroll pork and lay, rind side down, on board. Press stuffing along the centre. Re-roll firmly and tie with kitchen string at 5cm intervals.

Place pork, seam side down, on rack in pan. Dry skin with paper towel. Rub with oil and 1 tablespoon of salt. Bake for 20 minutes.

Reduce heat to 200C and bake for a further 1 hour 15 minutes or until pork is cooked and crackling is crisp and golden. Remove from oven, cover loosely with foil and rest for 15 minutes.

## Cranberry and red onion relish

25 g butter  
2 red onions, thinly sliced  
500 g frozen cranberries  
220 g brown sugar  
½ cup malt vinegar  
¼ cup balsamic vinegar  
½ teaspoons cooking salt  
2 whole cloves  
¼ teaspoon dried chilli flakes

Melt butter and cook onions until soft and tender, add remaining ingredients stir and over the heat until sugar dissolves. Bring to the boil, reduce heat and simmer uncovered stirring occasionally, for around 1 hour or until thickened.

Pour into 3 hot sterilised jars, seal immediately.

This mix will make 3 cups (750 ml)

## Apple sauce

2 granny smith apples peeled, cored and chopped  
160 ml maple syrup



1 cinnamon stick  
1 star anise  
2 cloves  
sea salt and cracked black pepper

Place the apples, maple syrup and spices in a large saucepan. Cover with a tight-fitting lid and cook, stirring occasionally over a low heat, for 20–25 minutes or until the chopped apples are soft. Add salt and pepper to the apple and crush with a wooden spoon.

Spoon into sterilised jars or clean containers and store in the refrigerator. Serve with roast pork. Makes 3 cups.

## Cauliflower gratin

800 g cauliflower, trimmed and cut into flowerets  
2 cups smoked cheddar, grated  
1 cup pouring cream  
1 tablespoon dijon mustard  
sea salt and cracked black pepper  
½ cup sage leaves

Preheat oven to 220C. Combine the dijon mustard with the cream. Place the cauliflower, half the cheddar, cream mixture, salt and pepper in a large bowl and toss to combine.

Place the cauliflower mixture in an ovenproof baking dish and sprinkle over the remaining cheddar. Cover with non-stick baking paper and aluminium foil, place on an oven tray and cook for 15 minutes.

Carefully remove baking paper and foil and cook for a further 12 minutes. Top with sage and cook for a further 2–4 minutes or until golden and bubbling, then serve.

## Maple syrup glazed carrots, sprouts and chilli pancetta

1 tablespoon olive oil  
500 g brussels sprouts, trimmed, halved  
2 bunches dutch carrots, trimmed, scrubbed, halved lengthways if large  
8 slices of round chilli pancetta  
2 red onions, peeled and quartered  
4 sage sprigs  
1/3 cup dried cranberries  
1/3 cup flaked almonds, toasted

### Maple syrup glaze

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
¼ cup pure maple syrup  
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

To make the maple syrup glaze, whisk all the ingredients together in a small jug and set aside.

In a fry pan add oil and then onion and pancetta and fry until softened. In a large roasting pan, combine sprouts and carrots. Top with onions and pancetta, then drizzle over half the glaze and toss to coat well. Season. Bake for 15 minutes at 220C.

Drizzle vegetables with remaining glaze and scatter sage on top. Stir with a large slotted spoon. Bake for a further 12 minutes or until just tender and starting to caramelise.

Stir through cranberries and almonds. Serve drizzled with pan juices.

## Tomato gratin

3 red onions, sliced thinly  
3 garlic cloves, crushed  
4 tablespoons olive oil  
1.2 kg mixed tomato varieties  
½ bunch basil, shredded  
8 oregano sprigs, with leaves picked  
1 tablespoon caster sugar  
100 g fresh breadcrumbs

Preheat oven to 180C.

Heat half the oil in a pan and gently soften the onions and garlic. Put the onions, tomatoes (halve the large ones), herbs, sugar in a baking dish. Season well and toss together. Top with breadcrumbs. Drizzle with the remaining oil and bake for 1 hour until top is golden and tomatoes are juicy.

## Roast pink eye potatoes with mustard dressing

1.5 kg pink eye potatoes, halved  
2 tablespoons olive oil  
sea salt and cracked black pepper  
200 g tub crème fraiche  
2 tablespoons of whole grain mustard  
¼ cup water  
¼ cup sage leaves, picked

Place the potatoes in a large saucepan of cold salted water. Place over high heat, cover with a lid and bring to the boil. Remove the lid and cook for 8–10 minutes or until tender. Drain well.

Preheat oven to 220C, place potatoes in a baking tray then drizzle with oil, sprinkle with salt and pepper and cook, cut side down, for 20 minutes or until lightly golden.

Combine the crème fraiche, mustard, water, salt and pepper in a large bowl. Place the potato on a serving plate, drizzle with dressing, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and top with sage to serve.

## Green beans with cranberry and pistachio butter

250 g butter, softened  
65 g cranberries  
½ cup pistachios, chopped  
2 garlic cloves, crushed  
2 tablespoons thyme, picked  
sea salt flakes and cracked black pepper  
green beans

Place the butter, cranberries, pistachio, garlic, thyme, salt and pepper in a medium bowl and mix well to combine. Place the pistachio butter on a sheet of non-stick baking paper and shape into a log. Roll to enclose, twisting the ends to seal, and refrigerate for 2 hours or until firm.

Steam green beans in salted water, then drain and place in serving dish, toss slices of the butter with beans and extra on top to serve.

## Barbecue prawns with lime chilli dressing

1.7 kg raw (green) large prawns  
¼ cup fresh coriander, coarsely chopped  
Chilli lime dressing  
1/3 cup lime and chilli dressing (Tassie's own Red Kellys label)  
1/3 cup lemon dressing (or Red Kellys lemon myrtle)  
½ cup olive oil  
2 garlic cloves, crushed  
2 teaspoons caster sugar  
2 teaspoons sea salt flakes  
optional 1–2 fresh long red chillies, sliced thinly.

Make the dressing by whisking all ingredients together.

De-vein the prawns, leaving their heads

## NOW FOR DESSERT

and shells intact. Combine prawns in a large bowl with half the dressing to marinate for half hour.

Heat the barbecue and oil it so the prawns don't stick! Start grilling until have a pink tinge – that means they're cooked.

Stir coriander into the remaining dressing and serve with the cooked prawns.

### Spinach and white bean dip

1 tablespoon olive oil  
1 large onion, finely chopped  
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
½ teaspoon thyme  
2 x 400 g cans cannellini beans, rinsed and drained  
50 g baby spinach leaves  
125 g cream cheese, softened  
1 tablespoon lemon juice  
olive oil, for drizzling  
salt and pepper, to taste

Heat oil in a heavy based pan over low heat. Add onion, garlic and thyme and cook for 5-6 minutes until onion has softened.

Add beans and spinach and cook a further 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat and allow to cool slightly.

Process bean mixture, cream cheese, lemon juice and seasonings until smooth. Transfer to serving bowl, drizzle with extra oil.

### Blue cheese & caramelised onion dip

1 tablespoon butter  
1 medium onion, thinly sliced  
2 garlic cloves, crushed  
2 sprigs sage, picked and chopped  
220 g tub spreadable cream cheese  
50 g blue cheese, crumbled  
salt and pepper, to taste

Melt butter in a small saucepan over a medium heat. Add onions, garlic and sage. Cook until onions soften and turn a light brown colour. Cool. Combine cream cheese, blue cheese and seasonings until smooth. Spoon into a serving bowl and top with caramelised onion to serve.

### Chocolate pavlova stack

6 egg whites, at room temperature  
pinch salt  
1 ½ cups caster sugar  
1 tablespoon cocoa, sifted  
250 g cream cheese, softened  
2/3 cup pure icing sugar, sifted  
1 teaspoon vanilla  
2 cups thickened cream  
fresh berries, for decoration  
2 x 30-gram chocolate Flake, broken into shards

Beat the egg whites and salt until stiff peaks form. Gradually add the sugar, 2 tablespoons at a time, beating well between additions until the meringue is thick and glossy.

Divide the mixture in half. Spread one half on to a paper lined tray to make a 25cm circle, repeat with the remaining mixture to make two rounds. Spoon the cocoa into a fine sieve and dust each meringue with the cocoa. Use a knife to only roughly swirl the cocoa though the meringues.

Bake in a slow oven 140C for 1 hour and 15 minutes or until crisp. Turn the oven off and leave the door slightly ajar to cool completely.

Beat the cream cheese and icing sugar with an electric mixer until smooth then add the vanilla and cream and beat until thickened.

Place one meringue on to a serving plate then top with half the cream, repeat with second layer and remaining cream. Top with fresh berries of your choice and then decorate with shards of Flake. Serve immediately.

### Coffee liqueur cheesecake

1 ¼ cups sweet biscuits, crumbled  
80 g butter, melted  
500 g cream cheese, softened  
¾ cup caster sugar  
2 tablespoons coffee liqueur (optional)  
3 teaspoons gelatine, dissolved in ¼ cup boiling water  
2 teaspoons instant coffee, dissolved in 1 tablespoon boiling water  
1 cup cream, lightly whipped

Blend biscuits to form crumbs and add butter, process till it comes together. Press into the base of a lightly greased 20cm springform pan. Chill.

Using an electric mixer beat cream cheese and sugar until smooth. Add the coffee liqueur, gelatine and coffee mixtures and beat until well combined, then gently fold in the whipped cream.

Pour cream mixture into the prepared base and refrigerate 3 hours or until set.

### Trifle

1 x 6 pack Jam Rollette, cut in slices (mini swiss rolls)  
85 ml orange liqueur or orange juice  
4 x 85g packets raspberry Aeroplane Jelly  
5 cups water (3 cups boiling water)  
1 punnet raspberries  
1 punnet strawberries, halved  
1 each punnet blueberries, raspberries and strawberries  
600 ml whipping cream  
3 tablespoons icing sugar  
1 ½ teaspoons vanilla essence  
900 g tub Pauls double thick vanilla custard

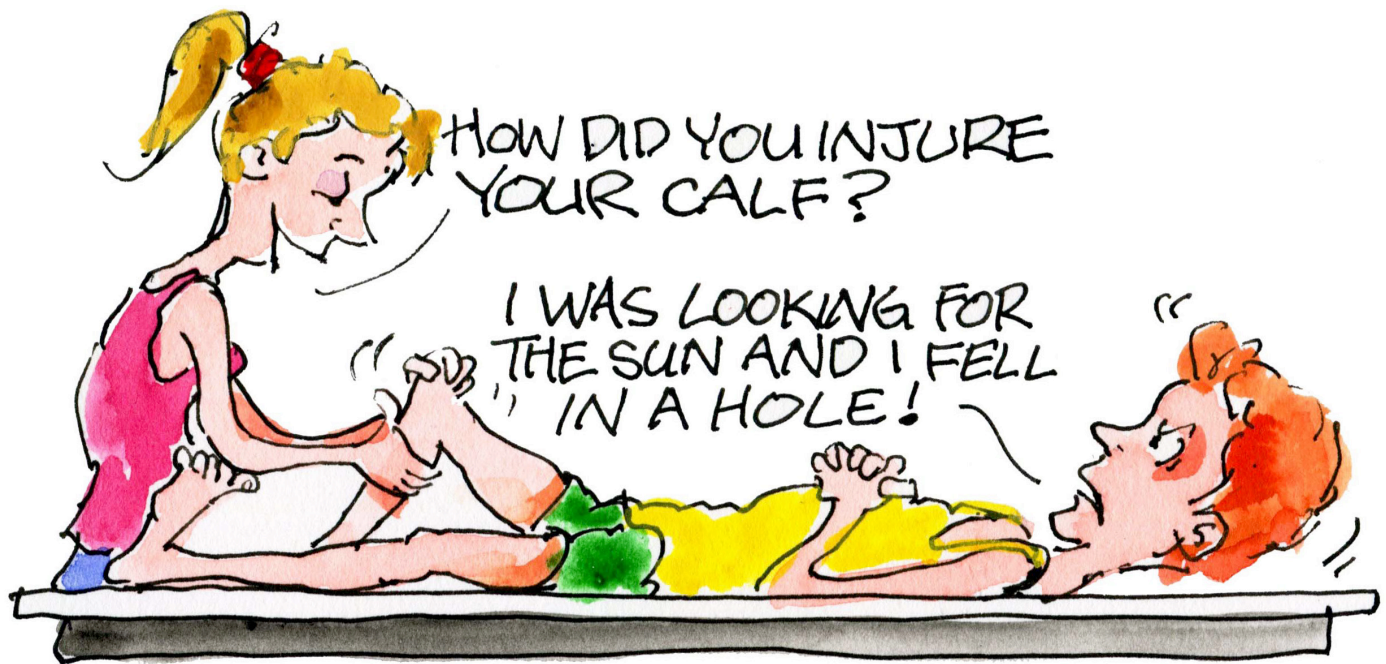
Cut cake slices and cover the bottom of 3.5 litre trifle dish with cake (might not use all) and sprinkle with liqueur or juice. Scatter over 1 punnet raspberries.

Bring 3 cups of the water to a boil in a large saucepan. Add jelly, mix until dissolved. Add remaining water. Pour half the jelly liquid carefully over the cake in the trifle dish. Refrigerate uncovered for 1.5 hours until it is partly set – still quite soft, but not watery. Pour remaining jelly in a bowl and leave on the counter (do not refrigerate).

Spoon over the custard, smooth surface, press on glass to seal (stops jelly bleed). Refrigerate for 1 hour until surface has firmed up a bit - just enough to hold the jelly (jelly is soft, so custard doesn't need to be fully set). Put remaining jelly in the fridge at the same time (to thicken a bit, but not too much, check jelly at 30 minutes, just to ensure it's not setting too fast).

Remove trifle and jelly from fridge. Jelly should be sloppy. Carefully spoon over jelly, smooth surface. Scatter over 1 punnet halved strawberries. Refrigerate for 3 hours+ (can leave in fridge for 48 hours, until ready to assemble).

Beat cream, sugar and vanilla until softly whipped. Once jelly is set, just before serving, top with cream, then pile over remaining berries. Dust with icing sugar.



## It's never too late to get back on the bike

Dear Brighton and hello from sunny London.

I say this very much sarcastically as I continue to try to adjust to it getting dark at around 4.30 each day. I know I try to keep ultra-positive but the lack of sunlight really does play its part in morale.

Overall I can say moving to London has been a great decision and I stand by my comments that putting yourself into new environments or new activities is good for the soul. This move has been a big experiment in that notion and it is the first time in years my partner and I have been actively seeking friends to fill in the gaps. It has been tough but it's worth it.

If I had a theme for today it would be getting back on the horse as soon as possible when things seem like they aren't going as planned.

We have missed the final train home on more than a few occasions and you just have to find another way. There's no choice but to work out a plan B and get on with it.

To link it to exercise, I am currently dealing with a calf injury so I am writing the advice I am trying to follow myself. This

isn't a long-term thing but I need to treat it right or it will not heal properly. Too many times I hear stories of the alternate from people. They play football or other sports, get a niggle and then five years later they are saying, 'I can't exercise 'cos I have a bad knee'. Obviously there are many occasions where there is serious damage but it can also be mental.

**'Don't lay down and let a setback beat you. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger'**

The urge to get back into it does fade over time and if left too long it becomes easier to just give up. I would urge you to fight it in the early stages, and will yourself better. I'm not a doctor and wouldn't want this to replace an expert opinion, but in my personal experience I have found that for many muscle injuries they actually need some load and, after the initial few hours of inflammation, movement that doesn't become pain is a great way to limit loss while injured.

Ice has its place in the first few days but compression is often equally important, and I am a big fan of heat after the first few days (for the right injury). My last tip is to get a big squirt of Voltaren gel and an equal amount of Hirudoid cream (an anti-bruising cream), and using plastic wrap spread them firmly on the injury and cover all in a light compression bandage overnight. For any small muscle tear or impact injury I find that for me it gets better much quicker.

My biggest point for today is: don't lay down and let a setback beat you. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but only if you act on it to make sure you keep moving forward.

The body has an amazing ability to heal, and get fit and with the right action it's never too late to get back on the bike (metaphorically and literally).

Next time I write, hopefully I'll have had some sun and the calf niggle will be a long-lost memory. Until then, make this new year the one where you bring back the 20 minutes exercise a day. You can do it.

Tristan





## SUMMERTIME...and the living is easy

Spring might be horticultural nirvana, yet summer when the living is easier can be the best of times for Tassie gardeners.

If you've been following my advice, your vegie beds should be overflowing with fabulous, healthy produce.

Yet even if you've been a little lazy in the vegie department, there's still lots to be gained from a few late crops – and if you want your surrounds looking their brilliant best for the holiday season, now is the time to act.

Here's a reminder list to get your summer garden performing to its summer best.

### Right to go in

With warm soils, there are few vegies that can't be planted.

If smart you'll look to beetroot, capsicum, carrot, eggplant, lettuce, tomato and zucchini.

And if you have already got those in, consider a few repeat plantings to extend your harvests.

Through December you can even get in late crops of peas and beans.

### Summer routine

While spring showers can be relied on to keep vegie beds well irrigated, in summer you do need to up your watering. A few really deep waterings every week are far preferable to a daily splash, although, on extreme days with hot, drying winds, beds and especially pots will need more.

### Make the most of mulch

Yes, I do harp on about the importance of mulching ... because it's vital.

While helping to smother weeds, mulch reduces moisture evaporation from the soil by more than 50%.

The trick is to choose mulch that is neither too fine nor too chunky.

Excessively chunky mulches soak up too much water, allowing little

to get into the soil, while super fine ones work as a barrier, directing water away.

Research shows slightly chunky mulch is preferable.

I like lucerne hay and sugar cane because they eventually break down, improving soil texture, although pine bark and wood chips work equally well.

Be wary, though, about freshly mulched wood chips, because as they break down a natural process called 'nitrogen drawdown' occurs in which the chips rob nitrogen from the soil below.

This can lead to nitrogen-deficient soils, and as nitrogen is vital to good plant growth there can be problems.

After chipping, wood chips are best left for a year or so before use. It's also a good idea to mix a nitrogen-rich fertiliser such as decayed chicken manure through them to counter the effect.

Even lawn clippings make reasonable mulch. If using fresh clippings, apply in thin layers because they can rot when wet and introduce disease to plants. Dried lawn clippings are preferable because they can be applied thicker, although you run the risk of odd patches of grass seeds germinating and you need to regularly break up any crusting that can act as a water barrier.

### Beat bugs naturally

Of course, it's not just us humans that like getting out into a summer garden.

Garden villains such as white fly, thrips and aphids are on the prowl.

White fly are tiny white-winged sap-suckers that cause wilting among crops such as tomatoes, beans, eggplants and cabbage, while thrips, another sap-sucker, can be just as destructive.

Mention the word aphids and you'll get rose lovers in a tizz, because as well as spreading disease these unwelcome critters thrive on new growth and buds.

The temptation is to whack this terrible trio

with a hefty chemical cocktail, kill the lot of 'em. That's not on in these enviro-friendly times and we all know it.

A far cheaper and gentler approach is to spray them early morning with a soapy water solution (two teaspoons of mild dishwash liquid and a teaspoon of vegetable oil to four litres of water).

This suffocates them. You might need to spray a couple more times over summer but the result is generally just as good.

### Good summer lookers

While the brilliant blooms of spring are no longer, there's more than enough to keep our gardens looking colourful and interesting.

If it's quick colour you're after, look no further than petunias (they're stunners in pots and will bloom continuously well into autumn), asters, African and French marigolds and verbenas.

Or what about a potted, already flowering lily?

Among my favourites are the newer salvias such as the Heatwave Selection that bloom better than the old and are even hardier.

The result of years of trialing by Plant Growers Australia, they're in striking blues, reds, pinks, purples and deep plum tones.

Give salvias reasonable, free-draining soil and they perform brilliantly.

If you're after a little summer love, a just-released salvia that has grabbed me is Salvia 'Amante'. Amate means "lover" in Spanish and this South American beauty boasting bright fuchsia red flowers and dark calyxes is sure to seduce.

Hailed as a genetic breakthrough, it gets to 1.2m x 1m and blooms from early spring through into winter. Right for pots and perennial borders, it's from Australian Perennial Growers ([australianperennials.com.au](http://australianperennials.com.au)) under various labels.

