

Pick Your Own

I am not sure we can always trust our childhood memories. I spent part of my early life in the enchanting Hampshire town of Alresford. The memories I have of it are all suspiciously idyllic. I went to a school called Sun Hill and thinking back the sun does seem to be shining constantly. The flowers appear constantly in bloom, and the pretty main street of the town, with its elegant timber framed, colour washed Georgian houses seems more perfect than it can possibly be in reality. Were the ducks and geese at the pond really as big and bold as I see them now? And did one of them really frighten me by biting my thumb when I offered it a crisp?

Alresford, which is near the cathedral city of Winchester, is famous as the nation's capital for watercress cultivation. What is watercress? Well, it is a leaf vegetable that is used in sandwiches or salads. Alresford has its own watercress festival and the local steam railway line is even named after this versatile and celebrated `superfood`. Cress is, in fact, not particularly tasty but it looks attractive and is claimed to have numerous health benefits. One of my, perhaps unreliable, memories of my few years in Alresford is of being taken out into the countryside by our teacher, walking hand in hand with my fellow classmates, boy girl boy girl, and picking cress from the river bank.

Whether this actually happened or not I can't say with any great confidence but it certainly could have done. Picking your own fruit or vegetables is a very popular activity in the UK and there are literally hundreds of places where *PYO* is available. In recent years the British have rediscovered the glories of their abundant pastoral resources and there has been a move to bridge, or even eliminate entirely, the gap between the farmer and the retailer. Shops selling organic foodstuffs are thriving and supermarkets have begun to understand the importance of clearly identifying the provenance of their wares. This development has seen our language grow with a rich crop of participle adjective phrases such as *home grown*, *organically produced*, *freshly caught* and, well, how many more can you find in this article?

So on your next visit to the UK why not head out into the country and try a bit of *PYO* for yourself? What could be more delightful than an afternoon spent in the golden sunshine filling your basket with the freshly produce imaginable? And for the Japanese, the world's most discerning and careful gift givers, it's hard to think of a more charming gift for a British friend than a bulging punnet of hand picked, locally grown, sun ripened strawberries.

I'd like to revisit Alresford one day for a stroll around one of *Country Life* magazine's favourite market towns to see how closely my image matches the truth. I'm sure it's still a lovely place but I suspect that when it comes to our earliest memories, just like the cress on that possibly imaginary afternoon, we like to *pick our own*.

<http://www.pickyourownfarms.org.uk/index.php#listings>

<http://www.alresford.org/index.php>

<http://www.countrylife.co.uk/countryside/article/104770/The-search-for-England-s-favourite-market-town.html>