

## Medlar Paste

Medlars are an orchard fruit that has long fallen out of favour with British sensibilities because the fruit needs to be rotten, or 'bletted', before it can be eaten. Eating unripe medlars can make you ill so it is important that once the fruits are ready in November you allow them time to 'blet.' They are ready when they are squishy and the flesh can be easily squeezed out of the fruit's leathery casing.

Once done, the flesh is sieved to remove any fibres and seeds and then heated in a pan with sugar, rosewater (another sleepy ingredient), and warming spices such as cinnamon. This can then be eaten as it is or used to fill pies and tarts.

John Gerard, in *The Herbal, or General History of Plants* of 1597, advised that medlars be cooked before eating as then they were 'more wholesome for the stomach.' If they were 'preserved with honey and sugar they are pleasant and delightful to the taste.' Gerard notes they could also help strengthen the stomach.

Being thought of as cold and dry by early modern people, what they would call 'melancholic', one needed to be careful not to eat too many as this could upset your humoral balance. Manchester physician Thomas Cogan advised in his *Heaven of Health* (1584) that medlars 'straine or binde the stomake, and therefore they are good after meales...being much eaten they ingender melancholie, and be rather *medicamentum* than *alimentum*.' Cogan saw them more as a medicine than as a culinary treat.

All this advice indicates that medlars were good to help close the stomach after meals, much like quinces, and were especially effective if combined with warm spices which had a similar binding and closing effect. Closing the stomach after meals was deemed necessary to aid digestion which in turn was believed to promote good sleep.

Don't let the rotten nature of medlars put you off having a try of medlar paste. If you can source them (by asking at gardens such as Ordsall Hall's, buying frozen ones online, or planting your own medlar tree) then they are a lovely mixture of apples and dried fruits. As an alternative, medlar jelly is readily available online.

✚ *Medilus sativa alera.*  
The other Garden Medlar.

