

Denise Dry in her garden.



GROW TO SAVE

In this garden, there is no such thing as excess produce.

If there was an award for preserving queen of the Wairarapa, Denise Dry would surely be a strong contender. She preserves around 600 jars of fruit and veges a year.

It's not only her output that is impressive, but the diverse range of produce that Denise preserves, which includes peaches, apricots, asparagus, apples, gherkins, beetroot, zucchini relish, quince jelly, basil pesto, lime marmalade and pickle, and tomato passata. She also makes her own cordials, vinegar and Worcester sauce as well as fermented produce such as sauerkraut. Plus, she also dries her own herbs and seeds. All are enjoyed by her husband and three adult children; others are given away to friends and neighbours.

Denise's gardening journey began modestly when she grew "a few herbs and lettuces" at the beachside bach she and husband Rick owned while living in Wellington. When they moved to Greytown about 12 years ago, it was to a larger property with a flower and vege garden. Before long, Denise was growing a range of fruit and veges herself, running an on-site farm shop, and selling spray-free produce to local restaurants. "Then I learned how to make medicines out of the plants, so I started running courses teaching people how to make balms and do fermenting," she says. "Once I decide to do something, I get totally into it."

However, more change beckoned, with Denise keen to move to a larger property with space for animals. The couple now live on a lifestyle property in rural Carterton, where Denise can let her passion truly run wild.

Let's start with the fruit trees: Peaches, nectarines, apples, apricots, pears, figs, dwarf cherries, feijoas, quince, berry fruit, citrus fruit, passionfruit and – Denise's latest passion – New Zealand cranberries are all grown on the property. The vege garden is kept full with silverbeet, spinach, kale, broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini, asparagus, strawberries, yam, capsicums, eggplants and tomatoes. "I like to have a bit of everything," Denise explains.

Which is where the preserving comes in. Years ago, a glut of zucchini inspired Denise to make chutney, and her passion quickly grew from there. "Because I was working from home, I got to do a huge amount in a short amount of time. The 600 jars a year is nothing new; I've been doing that for ages. My obsessive nature has helped. I just keep experimenting with things until I get it right."

But that obsession can have its downsides. "One of my kids said, 'Mum, no more Mexican food' because I got obsessed with making salsas. So I had to stop that. Another time a friend gave me a jar of homemade feijoa jelly. So then I went off on a jelly tangent for a while."

Interestingly, Denise is not a big fan of preserved fruit. "I like fresh fruit, but not in large amounts. My tastes are for more savoury."

Denise uses a variety of preserving methods, including an electric water bath preserver she imported from Australia many years ago. "You just plug in, fill it up with water, and put in your jars of raw fruit. The fruit cooks in the jar. It upped my production massively because you can fit in nine one-litre jars at a time."

Another much-loved appliance is the slow cooker, which is used for making relishes.

Having worked together before in IT, Denise and Rick now work together selling real estate in the Wairarapa. It's a busy life, but Denise aims to carve out one day of each week to focus on preserving. She feels real estate and preserving share many similarities. "Both fields are mentally and creatively stimulating. In real estate, every client is different, and likewise when you're preserving, every harvest is different." ■

Denise Dry's Worcester Sauce

- 1kg plums (if you like a fruitier version, just add more plums)
- 2 cup malt vinegar
- 1 cup treacle (you can use brown sugar instead if you prefer)
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce (optional)
- 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 teaspoon salt

Put all the ingredients in a saucepan. Cook gently for about 20 minutes until plums are soft and broken down. Give them a quick mash when they are cooked to burst the plum and release the flavour.

Strain through muslin or a fine sieve for a smoother, more sauce-like texture and to remove the plum pips.

Simmer another 5–10 minutes if you want a thicker texture.

Bottle and leave to mature. Store in a cool dark spot. Denise says it will taste fantastic in about three months.



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.