

Let's go OUTSIDE

Whether you're planning a beach picnic or just grabbing some sandwiches and heading for the park, a little planning will guarantee a carefree day

{ WORDS **SALLY SMITH** }

ADVICE

On sunny days, create a chill-out area with a shade sail. Take a large piece of muslin and drape or tie it to the nearest tree – easier than carrying a heavy gazebo.

TIP
If you spot any interesting plants or wildlife, let them know at naturescalendar.org.uk.

Nothing sounds as appealing as a picnic on a warm summer's day, but how often have you ended up loaded down with too much stuff you don't need, cold, uncomfortable and arguing over the forgotten corkscrew? If you wish you'd been better prepared, you're not alone – a recent poll by the National Trust found that while most of us love to eat outdoors, more than half were put off by our unpredictable weather, being pestered by wasps and often struggling to think of places to go.

There's not much we can do about the weather but being prepared can pay dividends. Think lightweight, portable and waterproof and you'll be ready for anything, says Susanna Scott, founder of parent bloggers site Britmums. 'Traditional hampers are difficult to carry and, let's face it, the best picnic spots are a bit of a walk! So we fill two backpack hampers with food and drink, and head out to our favourite place in Medmenham in the Chilterns.'

And take practical considerations into account, too, advises Simon Barnet from the Ramblers: 'Make sure everyone has comfy clothes, shoes and extra layers in case of rain or cold weather – that way, you'll have fun even if the heavens do open.'

Sting SOS

Getting close to nature is fun but warn children to take care around stinging nettles, wasps and ants. 'Insect bites or stings tend to be painful rather than dangerous,' says Clive James from St John Ambulance. 'Scrape it off sideways with your fingernail or a credit card – do not use tweezers. Apply an ice pack or cold drinks can to reduce the swelling. Stings to the throat or mouth may block the airway – drink a glass of cold water or suck an ice cube. If you see swelling, or any difficulty breathing, call 999 for an ambulance.'

Make it an adventure

Children love the great outdoors, and as it's the perfect opportunity to explore, be messy and have a bit of freedom, try not to be too over-protective. 'The key is preparing them so they know what they can and can't do, and what to do if something happens,' explains NSPCC child protection expert Chris Cloke. 'Set a physical boundary, which will depend on their age, siblings and maturity. Make it clear that if they want to go beyond this boundary, they must ask first.'

For fun games with the family, look to nature. Follow a bee and see where it goes or find a sunny spot to create shadow pictures with grass. Take a look at naturedetectives.org.uk for ideas before you go.

PICNIC PLANNING

1 Make a checklist and stick to it. Take plenty of clips to seal open packets, spare bags for rubbish or wet clothes, and loads of wipes and hand sanitiser for those spills and accidents that are bound to happen.

2 Keep picnic essentials clean and packed ready for next time – blanket, rucksack, Tupperware, sun cream, hats and first aid kit (we like Boots and St John Ambulance Travel First Aid Kit from Boots for £11.99).

3 Ditch the fancy hamper and go for a cooler backpack that's easier to carry and will leave you hands free. Try the DNC Polar Gear Insulated Backpack (John Lewis, £29.99) that includes cutlery, plates and tumblers.

4 Keep food fresh and unsquashed with Sistema's verstile new range of lunchboxes and containers. With split compartments, clip-on hinged lids and bright

colours, they'll keep your picnic goodies stylishly safe, too (from £3.99, sistemaplastics.com).

5 'Sitting on damp grass isn't fun, so a decent-sized waterproof blanket gives everyone enough space to relax,' says Carien Reinking from picnic suppliers justajoy.co.uk. 'Our extra-large (180cm x 140cm) cotton rug with 100 per cent waterproof backing with carry bag (£39.50) is big enough for a family.'



Speedy cheese straws

Makes about 14

375g/13oz pack ready-rolled puff pastry

Flour to dust

40g/1½oz each Parmesan and Cheddar, grated

1 medium egg, beaten

¼tsp paprika

1tsp poppy seeds

1 Preheat the oven to gas mark 6/200°C (180°C in a fan oven). Unroll the pastry and lay it on a floured surface. Sprinkle over most of both cheeses, then fold the pastry in half, then in half again. Re-roll to a 30.5cm x 12.5cm (12in x 5in) rectangle.

2 Trim the edges and discard. Brush with beaten egg, then sprinkle over the remaining cheese, paprika and poppy seeds.

3 Cut into 2cm-wide strips across the width of the pastry, then transfer to a baking sheet and cook for 15-20 mins until deep golden brown. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Sweetcorn and bacon chowder

Serves 6

1tbsp olive oil

200g/7oz smoked bacon lardons

1 large onion, finely chopped

2 celery sticks, chopped

2 large carrots, chopped

¼tsp each ground cinnamon and smoked paprika

1.3 litres/2¼pt vegetable stock

2 x 198g/7oz tins sweetcorn, drained

250ml/8fl oz double cream

Large handful of fresh parsley, roughly chopped

1 Heat oil in a pan and fry the lardons, veg and spices for 5-10 mins until the veg is soft.

2 Pour in the stock, bring to the boil, then simmer for 5 mins or until the veg is tender. Add the sweetcorn, cream and most of the parsley. Simmer for 2-3 mins.

3 Check seasoning and pour into a Thermos.

READER'S TIPS

Wet wipes, a wet cloth, napkins and paper towels are invaluable for wiping hands and sorting out any spillages.

Cheesy spinach muffins

Makes 6

100g/3½oz baby spinach

150g/5oz self-raising flour

1tsp baking powder

25g/1oz Parmesan-style cheese, grated

50g/2oz Cheddar, finely cubed

25g/1oz butter, melted

100ml/3½fl oz milk

2 medium eggs

Small handful fresh parsley, finely chopped

1 Preheat the oven to gas mark 6/200°C (180°C in a fan oven). Line six holes in a 12-hole muffin tin with paper cases.

2 Put the spinach into a sieve and pour over boiling water from the kettle until it wilts. Leave to cool, then squeeze out as much water as you can before finely chopping it. Set aside.

3 In a large bowl, mix together the flour, baking powder, most of the Parmesan and Cheddar cheeses and some seasoning.

4 In a separate jug, whisk together the butter, milk, eggs, parsley and chopped spinach. Quickly mix the wet ingredients into the dry – don't worry if there are floury lumps, as these will cook out.

5 Divide the mixture evenly among the paper cases, then sprinkle over the remaining cheeses. Cook for 12-15 mins until risen and golden.



Strawberry and clotted cream sandwiches

Thick slices of soft white bread
Clotted cream
Ripe strawberries, sliced
Sugar

- 1 Take thick slices of soft white bread with a thin, crisp crust and spread them with lashings of clotted cream.
 - 2 Strew with slices of ripe strawberries and dust with sugar. Savour slowly.
- Recipe by Shona Crawford Poole*

Tuna picnic loaf

Serves 4

1 large baguette
1 clove garlic, crushed
2 x 200g/7oz jars tuna in oil, drained, reserving 3tbsp oil
1tbsp red wine vinegar
1 small bunch basil, torn
2-4 ripe tomatoes, thinly sliced
4 chargrilled artichoke hearts, halved
1 handful olives and capers

- 1 Cut the baguette in half and scoop out the bread from centre. Mix garlic, oil and vinegar, and season. Use to brush inside one half of loaf.
- 2 Layer tuna, basil, tomatoes and artichokes in the bottom half of loaf. Scatter olives and capers.
- 3 Top with remaining baguette half and tightly wrap in clear film to take to picnic.

TIP
 No cool bag?
 Avoid food with
 mayo-based or
 dairy-based
 dressings.



Roasted vegetables and feta picnic loaf

Serves 8

1 ciabatta loaf

1tbsp olive oil

2 courgettes, cut into batons, about 5cm/2in long

1 red, orange and yellow pepper, deseeded and cut into strips

2 red onions, cut into eights

A drizzle of good-quality, thick balsamic vinegar

100g/3½oz feta, cut into cubes

1 Preheat the oven to gas mark 6/200°C (180°C in a fan oven). Sit the ciabatta loaf on a baking sheet and put in the oven for about 10 mins.

Then remove, slice it in half lengthways and put to one side.

2 Add the olive oil and vegetables to a roasting

tin. Season with a little sea salt and freshly ground black pepper and turn to coat. Roast for about 20 mins until just beginning to turn golden. Remove the vegetables and drizzle over balsamic vinegar, then give it a stir so it's all coated.

3 Remove a little bread from inside the loaf and spoon half of the vegetable mixture into the base. Then layer with feta and finish with the remaining veg. Sandwich the loaf together and flatten with the back of your hand. Wrap in clear film tightly and leave to cool for about 2 hrs.

4 At the picnic, cut into slices through the clingfilm, then remove it before eating.

READER'S TIPS

Don't take any food that's sticky or sweet, as this will attract wasps. Part of the fun is being able to put food out and let people help themselves

Hummus and pepper wrap

Serves 4

250ml/8fl oz hummus

Four tortilla wraps

Three peppers, one yellow, two red, sliced vertically, seeds removed

1 bunch watercress

1 Spread hummus thinly over the wraps.

2 Pile on the thinly sliced peppers in the centre of each wrap.

3 Add a small bunch of watercress to each. Roll up the wrap.

4 Wrap in greaseproof paper to take to the picnic.



Potted smoked trout

125g/4oz salted butter, cubed
200g/7oz trout fillets, flaked
3tbsp soured cream
1tsp creamed horseradish
Zest of 1 lemon
Juice of ½ lemon
Flat-leaf parsley, chopped

TIP
Remember some rubbish bags and make sure you take it all with you.

- 1 In a pan, gently melt the butter, then pour it into a bowl. Add the trout, soured cream, horseradish, lemon zest and juice, and parsley. Mix well, then season to taste.
- 2 Spoon into a serving bowl or container and chill until set – about 30 mins. Serve with crusty bread.

Pumpernickel open beef sandwich

Serves 4

4 slices pumpernickel bread
2 red onions, sliced thinly
1 bunch of watercress
4 thin slices roast beef
Jar or horseradish sauce

- 1 Set out four plates at the picnic. Put one slice of pumpernickel bread on each.
- 2 Assemble sliced onions, watercress and beef on the pumpernickel.
- 3 Drizzle with horseradish sauce to serve.

WHERE TO GO...

There are plenty of unusual places for alfresco dining in the UK – from woodlands to beaches, stately homes and local parks. Even cities can offer hidden treasures, says Rob Haslam, a keen walker, who has developed a walk in Sheffield with a perfect spot for lunch. 'If you know where to look, there are a couple of hills in the city where moorland heather grows in abundance,

particularly in August. Kids will love the metal sculptures and there are two great picnic spots with stunning views.' See sheffieldblog.com/tag/rob-haslam. Here are a few more hidden gems:
Kynance Cove, Cornwall
A sandy beach on the most southerly point of the UK that appears when the tide goes out. A lovely spot, especially in the afternoon when it catches the sun.

Clumber Park, Nottinghamshire
Enjoy 3,800 acres of open parkland, woods and gardens for free. If you pick your lunch spot next to the magnificent lake, you'll have plenty of space to relax.
Clipsham Yew Tree Avenue
Near Oakham in Rutland, you can find a shady spot here among the unique collection of 150 clipped yew trees.