

# Summer Sweetness in a Purple Jar



by Susan Yoder Ackerman art by Dana Regan

If there was anything Finn liked better than grape jam on peanut butter, it was picking grapes with Mom at the end of summer.

His sister Hazel wasn't so sure. There were always bees. They buzzed all over the grapes at Wenger Farm, and why wouldn't they? Warm sticky juice oozed off every bunch of grapes and made the whole farm smell heavenly.



“I like Concord grapes,” Hazel said, “but I wish they didn’t have seeds. The grocery store grapes don’t.”

“Who cares? Grapes you pick yourself are the yummiest!” Finn popped one into his mouth and ate it—seeds, skin, and all.

“Fresh and local can’t be beat,” agreed Mom. “Concord grapes were first grown in Massachusetts, but they do just fine right here in Virginia, in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

“They don’t last long, though,” said Finn. “I wish we had them all year.”

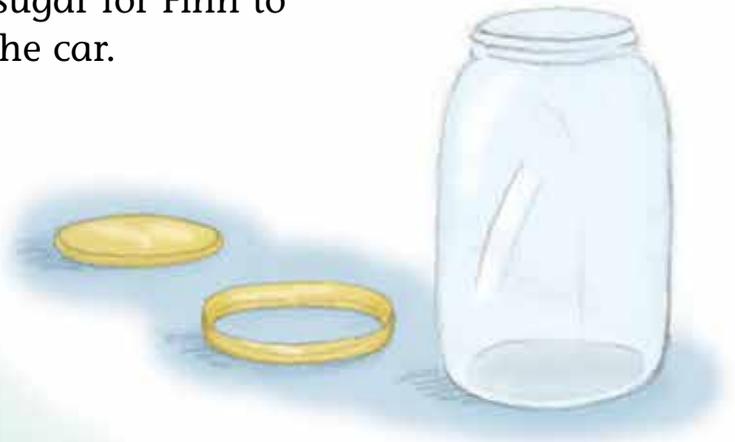
“What we could do,” said Mom, “is make grape jam. It’ll keep in the pantry all year long, and whenever we open a jar, it’ll smell just the same as the grapes do today. But hey, it’s a lot of work. Are you up for that?”

Finn and Hazel said they were. Finn told Hazel, "I can think of an easy way to turn a bunch of grapes into jam. Use the blender and smoosh them up until they get thick."

"Seeds and all?" shrieked Hazel.

"It's not quite that simple, Finn," laughed Mom. "And don't worry, Hazel. You can help get the seeds out. I'll show you."

On the way home, they stopped for supplies. There were flat lids and circle lids and a box of little glass jars. There was a small jar of powdery pectin so the jam wouldn't be runny, and a big bag of sugar for Finn to carry to the car.



At home, Finn washed the bunches of grapes and laid them on kitchen towels to dry.

Hazel perched on a stool. "What can I do, Mom?"

"Just pull each grape off the stem," Mom said, handing her a bowl. "Here's a bowl for you too, Finn. We'll need a lot."





Slowly they filled the bowls.  
Sometimes the grapes missed the bowl.

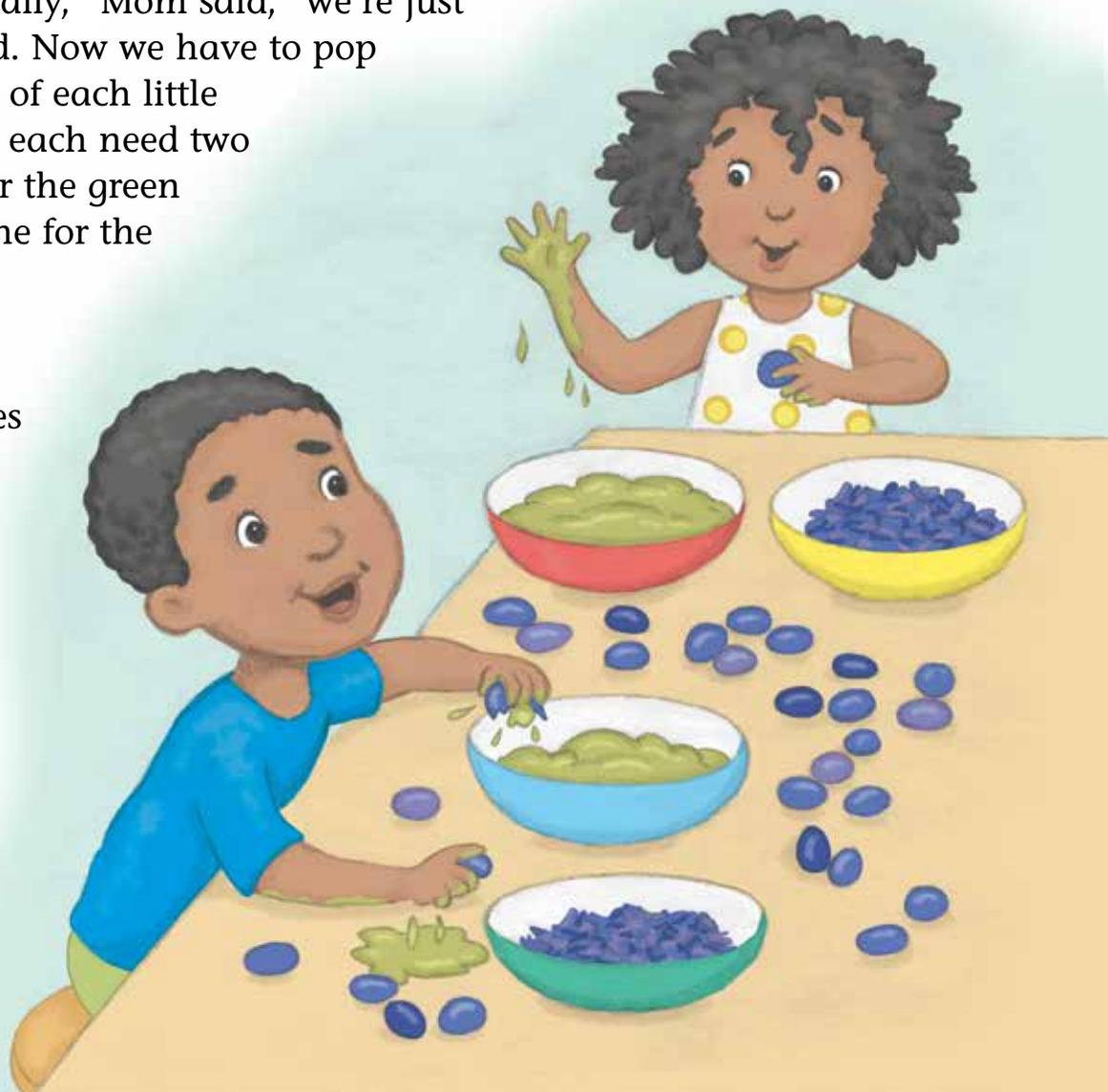
“Yikes! I feel something squishy!”  
Mom pointed to a big purple splotch  
on her white sock. “Careful. Don’t drop  
them on the floor!”

“Oops, sorry, Mom,” said Hazel.  
Finally, she got up to wash her sticky  
hands. “We’re all done!” she said.

“Well, actually,” Mom said, “we’re just  
getting started. Now we have to pop  
the inside out of each little  
grape. So you each need two  
bowls. One for the green  
insides and one for the  
purple skins.”

It was fun  
squirting wet,  
slippery grapes  
out of their  
skins. But it  
took forever.  
And it was  
messy.

“Look at  
the juice  
running  
down your  
arm!” Finn  
said to  
Hazel.



“Well, you have juice dripping off your elbow!” she replied.

When they finally finished, Mom set the skins aside. Then she put all the green insides into a pot and cooked them until they were soft.

“Who wants to strain the seeds out?” Mom asked.

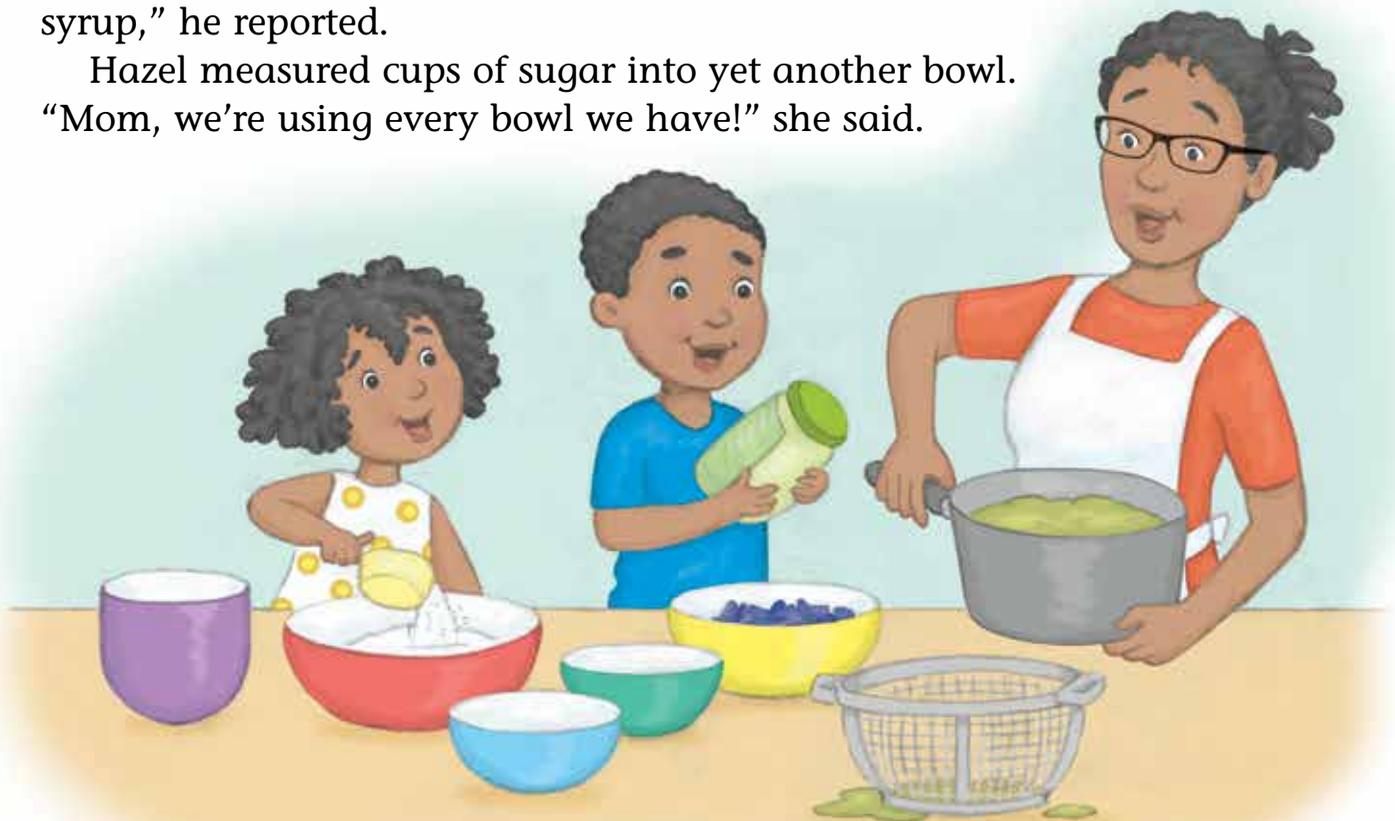
Finn and Hazel took turns stirring the mushy pulp through the strainer.



“See, Hazel. The strainer caught all the seeds,” said Mom. “You can throw them away. Now we’ll mix this grapey green goo together with the skins we saved. Then we can cook the jam.”

Finn read the directions that came with the pectin. “Adding pectin and sugar and heating everything up thickens the jam and keeps it from being a runny syrup,” he reported.

Hazel measured cups of sugar into yet another bowl. “Mom, we’re using every bowl we have!” she said.





Mom laughed. “I told you it was a lot of work!” She stirred the pot of grapes over the heat, adding the pectin and sugar. “Stand back. This is really hot!”

Soon the jam was done, all good-smelling and bubbly. Mom filled clean jars with the hot jam, tightened the lids, and put them into a big pot of boiling water.

“To keep jars on the shelf,” she said, “they have to have a hot water bath. Then the lids will seal and no germs can get in.”



When they had boiled long enough, Mom lifted each jar out and set it on a towel. There was a loud ping! Then another ping!

“The glass jars are breaking!” cried Finn.

“No, they’re sealing. What a beautiful sound,” Mom said. She stood admiring the row of shiny jars.



“Hope you didn’t seal them all!” Hazel said.

“I didn’t,” Mom said. She placed a china dish of jam on the table. “Time for a taste test!”

For dinner, the children enjoyed the most delicious peanut butter and jam sandwiches ever. And in the months to come, every time they popped the lid off a jar, they smelled and tasted grapes picked fresh in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

