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March Garden

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No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden. But though an old man, I am but a young gardener.
—Thomas Jefferson, 1811

It doesn't take a mental giant to discover that this is a challenging area to grow flowers and vegetables. The climate is great: one month each of summer and winter with five months of spring and fall. Not quite Mediterranean, but comfortable enough. The challenge is water and poor soil combined with an encroaching forest and everything that walks or crawls out of it.

Clearly some plants do thrive here, for, in addition to the forest giants, there are hundreds of indigenous plant species. Many germinate in the fall, grow slowly through the winter to flower in early summer. This habit also characterizes many of our most popular herbs, the sort of herbs that many of us use in cooking.

Just over thirty years ago, when Mary and I first moved to the islands, I planted a herb garden on a rocky knoll among a tangle of wild grass and mahonia, and most of them are still there. Many popular herbs are still fairly close to their wild ancestors implying that they are tough, undemanding and only ask for a patch of earth and a little sun and water. The harder herbs grow, the better the aroma and flavour. Never plant herbs into a rich compost as you would for strawberries because they will over-grow into rambling leggy weeds with little or no flavour, and never, ever feed them with a liquid fertilizer unless you want to kill them with kindness.

Many culinary herbs are quite drought and deer resistant, attract bees and butterflies, look gorgeous, taste great and contain more vitamins and minerals than a shelf of commercial dietary supplements. Back in the early eighties I had a herb farm and supplied Safeway with

bunches of fresh herbs from Easter through Thanksgiving.

I distinguish my herbs between tender annuals and the more or less hardy perennials. In the first category the big one for summer is basil. Native to the Nile valley in Ethiopia, basil is a tropical plant that needs a warm earth. I sow it under glass in late March, plant out in early May and gather from June through November. Basil grown outside tastes far better than basil grown under glass and is not bothered by a few cold or wet days. I do not try to grow it through the winter but in August I blend bunches of it in olive oil and freeze it for later use.

Summer savory is another sun-lover from the hills of Italy so I wait until late May or early June before scattering seeds along a border that gets lots of sun. Savory grows into an untidy fragrant bush beloved by bees and butterflies. The Romans sowed drifts of it around their bee-hives. You can pick it anytime there are leaves to spare and gather a few bunches for drying in late August.

Next to basil, I probably use more oregano than any other herb and now have great clumps of it growing in the grass in the orchard. Oregano is a very hardy perennial that produces masses of rose coloured flowers in July and is one of the few herbs that taste better when dried. And, like most herbs, they develop the highest concentration of aromatic compounds and amino acids just before the flowers are fully open so oregano can be picked at its peak one day in the summer for a whole year's supply.

Rosemary, sage, thyme, lavender and bay grow into scrubby bushes, or small trees in the case of bay, that are used extensively by landscape designers when all else fails. I keep all of the above posted around the house and even in a January snow I can always find a few fragrant leaves that are far better than some dusty specimen sold in a plastic jar. They are so easy to grow and so undemanding why bother to dry and store them when the real thing's just outside the window? Buy plants from a local nursery

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and plant them with a shovelful of compost in late March.

Many of the remaining common herbs are hardy perennials best left in a quiet corner that is not too dry. There are hundreds of mints with fragrances ranging from toothpaste and chocolate to apple and orange. I grow 'English Mint' also known as 'lamb mint' which is an old spearmint/peppermint cross and has a strong clean flavour that makes a good sauce and a refreshing tea. For fun I also grow Corsican mint that has one of the smallest flowers in the world. This tiny plant looks a bit like moss and has an incredible crème d'menthe aroma, and for centuries was used to flavour the famous liqueur. Corsican mint, chopped over sun-warmed strawberries is another story, but you will have to get down on your hands and knees with nail scissors to harvest it.

Tarragon, fennel and sweet Cicely will grow well at the back of your perennial flower bed, behind the peonies or poppies. Three to five feet high they make a fine summer hedge and are always happy to donate a few leaves for your chicken Kiev, halibut steak or salad. Like parsley, chervil, salad burnet, mountain cress and cilantro originate in northern Europe and Asia and are better grown in cool ground so I grow them primarily for winter use by sowing them in July/August in pots or some back sheltered spot where they can be left alone. Do not try to transplant these herbs as they will incline to flower and die prematurely.

Garlic and chives are alliums that grow like daffodils. Wild alliums (onions) grow on the rocky ridges and banks near the waterfront of all the islands and flower in late April/May. If you want big bulbs, transplant garlic and chives into a rich medium in October and cover with a mulch of seaweed to give them a little salt. Gather them when they are dry in late July and replant the bed with winter carrots.

With the exception of things like garlic and basil most people don't need herbs by the bushel so tuck them in quiet sunny corners or sprinkle a row in front of the parsnips. And, as mentioned above, they are great for landscaping. Deer will take parsley and cilantro, and mint can run rampant over a well-watered bed if not contained. For that wild patchy area next to the shed try comfrey, horseradish or lovage (note, I said 'or' not 'and'—these herbs can get big. Then in between the roses and petunias you can always throw in borage, calendulas, nasturtiums, and violets to spice-up and colour a salad.

For the adventurous, some spices will grow here if the summer is long or you resort to glass covers. Anise, fenugreek and cumin grow wild in Persia and India and thrive when everything else, including the gardener, begin to wilt. If you can't find a packet of seed try a few seeds from your pantry, if they are not too old. Sow them on a hot day in May, water and cover with a sheet of glass until they germinate. Ginger comes from south-east Asia and likes a more tropical climate. Plant it in a pot with lots of compost, keep it hot and soak it when it gets dry. If it hasn't been sprayed with growth retardant it might produce a big root to keep you going all winter.

Recipes

Herbs are a culinary supplement. It is not often that we munch down a bunch of dill or boil up a mess of sage. Herbs, however, can make a meal. Sometimes supporting the flavour of a vegetable like chived potatoes or providing a counter flavour like rosemary BBQ'd steak, no garden or pantry is complete without a complement of fresh and dried herbs.

Carrots with...

• 1 bunch fresh carrots • Olive oil, basil vinegar • Honey, garlic & fresh chopped tarragon

Brush and cook the carrots for about 10 minutes until nearly done. Drain and combine the remaining ingredients to taste. Reheat stirring frequently, and serve with grilled sole or lamb.

Potatoes with...

• 3-5 potatoes • oil, salt, pepper • fresh rosemary • peanuts • 1 chili pepper

Cut the potatoes into chunks and boil for 10 minutes until half cooked. Drain well. Toss a little oil into a frying pan and fry the potatoes until they begin to brown. Season and sprinkle with fresh chopped rosemary. For extra flavour add a few peanuts and a chopped chili and continue to fry until they are nearly burnt.

Herb butters

Cream some butter in a bowl then add: • chopped chives, parsley & rosemary • savory & mustard seed • dill & oregano • mint & lemon zest • garlic & tarragon • mustard & horseradish • tarragon & thyme • sage & bacon bits

Honey herbed melon

• 1 honey dew • ½ cup wildflower honey • Chopped Corsican or peppermint • A few raspberries

Chop or ball the melon. Toss all the ingredients except the berries. Cover, chill and macerate for at least an hour. Re-toss, scoop into a serving bowl, top with berries and serve with espresso and Grand Marnier. ☞

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