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February Garden & Kitchen Calendar

As Liu Sung grubbed about his garden one spring day, he thought of the coming harvest from his peach trees, now in bloom, and of the melons that would ripen from the seeds he now held in his hand. He could dream ahead to soft, sweet golden vegetables. But now, he wished someone would come and relieve him of the work so he can go inside and eat.

—Liu Sung, 1321-1381

Spring is imminent. The earliest bulbs are up, or even finished. Early-flowering trees and bushes are dusting the ground with pollen, the wild bees are bumbling among the flowers, and every gardener is outside dreaming of summer.

To be a gardener you must first become an optimist. So you experiment with a few seeds sown too early or too close to the cedar trees. I am an inveterate experimenter with about a fifty percent success rating so I'm never sure if I will learn from the losses or repeat the same annual ritual in perpetuity.

Five years ago I envisioned a semi-wildflower garden with drifts of naturalized deer-and-drought resistant plants providing colour and texture to an otherwise barren area supporting a few venerable arbutus.

The project began with scattering seeds of foxglove, Nigella and California poppy, and planting drifts of daffodils and Camus lilies. Year one, the seeds failed to germinate. Year two, I sowed them in pots and transplanted them. The deer took all of the Nigella and two thirds of the poppies, leaving a fine show of foxgloves. Year three I sowed more of everything. The foxgloves naturalized and are beginning to look as though they belong. The poppies are semi-established. The deer still take some but in the hollows and between the boulders with no help from me, they shine with brilliant orange all summer. The Nigella? Well, maybe this year.... Meanwhile: the daffodils flower as only daffodils can and the deer ate all the Camus.

Two years ago I did not harvest all the potatoes. Many were simply too small and the ground turned muddy in the November rains and it froze for a week in December. But by late January the potatoes bed was alive with young shoots that, despite being nipped by frost, persisted in growing. So I threw compost and straw over the whole lot and left them to their fate. Result? With no watering or other care they produced a bumper crop.

Still on the subject of potatoes: I kept a bucket of seed potatoes in the cool and dark until the July 1st weekend before interring them deeply in warm clay. Again I left them without water as they grew rapidly through July and August and by late October I again harvested large sweet tubers.

Last spring was long and wet so the first two sowings of carrots were slurped by slugs. The main pests are the European black slugs that cruise about at night. Several times I went out at dusk with a trowel and corralled 50-60 into a bucket but the herds just kept stampeding over the vegetables. That said, the April sowing did succeed and another sowing under glass in early September is providing us with very sweet carrots as I write. For winter use I also sowed yellow bush-beans in late August which I transplanted under glass in September. They gave us a small harvest later in October and November before the cold set in.

Many of the plants used to fill hanging baskets are perennial so if, like me, you have a few dried-out baskets in the shed clip off the all the dead tops, soak them with tepid water and place them near a window or under a sheet of clear plastic for a couple of weeks. After the first few days of warmer weather you might find geraniums, petunias, lobelia and antirrhinums poking through. Baskets are frequently overcrowded so be careful to separate the plants with minimal damage. Pot them up in a good soil-mix or plant them outside for an early show.

For those with a greenhouse or an east facing window,

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February is the perfect time for the early sowings of broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and all those lettuce and mesclun greens. And any warm day late in the month, carrots, lettuce and snow peas can be sown in well-drained earth or raised beds with a covering of glass or plastic to hold the heat and discourage slugs.

Still outside, any dry day with no wind is the time to spray roses and fruit trees with lime-sulphur to discourage pests and fungi. These sprays are quite benign in the garden but once the trees are flowering it is too late as it can kill bees.

Recipes

In times before our food was transported from tropical countries, early spring was anticipated with joy for the first fresh greens. We can eat most of the shoots found in the field and forest but the fashions in food flavours tend to inhibit most of us from collecting wild food. Miners lettuce, wild garlic and onions, sorrel, watercress, and of course stinging nettles. Many of them can simply be used in salads or to augment a store bought lettuce, or like nettles they can be steamed or stir-fried.

Louis XIV was very fond of soups and sauces and the Lord Steward of the King's Household, Louis de Bechamel, spent his life creating them.

Herbed Bechamel Sauce:

Butter, flour, milk, fresh wild greens and garden herbs

Melt a little butter in a heavy pot, add a little flour and stir into a paste. Add milk stirring all the time until a creamy consistency has been reached. Chop the herbs, add to the sauce and cook for 5 minutes. Season with salt, pepper & nutmeg. Serve hot over toast with mushrooms, asparagus, cheese, eggs or what-have-you.

Poached eggs on mixed garden or wild herbs

2 potatoes, 2-3 Tbsp butter, 1/2 cup unflavoured yogurt, 1 cup fresh chopped herbs, 4 eggs

Boil, drain and mash the potatoes. Beat in the butter, yogurt and herbs. Poach the eggs and serve in potato nests.

Omelette aux fines herbes

4 eggs, 2 Tbsp milk, 1 Tbsp butter, salt & pepper, 1/2 cup chopped chervil, parsley, tarragon, chives

Lightly beat the eggs & milk in a bowl. Heat an egg pan until the butter sizzles but does not burn. Pour in the egg mix and allow the omelette to set around the edges. Add the herbs, seasoning and cover. Omelettes should be cooked quickly to avoid toughness and drying out. Turn onto a warmed plate and serve with hot toast and a glass of mimosa (champagne & orange juice) followed by fresh fruit and coffee. ☞