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December Garden Calendar

Brian Crumblehulme

The Holly & the Ivy, when they are both full grown... of all the trees that are in the British woods in times of yore, the holly was the only evergreen.

In pre-modern times ancient Brits supplemented their diet with wild game and the hunter out in the forest chasing supper would have been amazed at the sight of a brilliant shiny, green tree loaded with red berries. It is no small wonder, then, that when the missionaries came by seeking converts the holly tree was up there on the list of important symbols.

Also in winter the ivy attracted attention for it's ability to clothe a dead-looking oak or elm tree and make it appear alive. British expatriates colonizing the Islands a hundred years ago introduced both species and along with the ubiquitous broom and hawthorn all of which are now considered invasive.

In winter the Celts in the British Islands and their Teutonic cousins in Germany would cut branches of green trees and bushes to decorate their homes and halls, a tradition that persists in corrupted form today with the invention of flashing lights and plastic effigies.

Ever the romantic, I like to take a day in mid-December to gather winter greens. I can feel quite virtuous cutting branches of holly or broom to shape into wreaths and garlands, and a few pruned cedar branches placed around the floor look good and create a wonderful foresty aroma. I'm not a fan of needlessly cutting fir trees for decoration, but if you take it as an opportunity to do a little judicious thinning in an overgrown thicket, you can salvage a tree to safely stand in a bucket for a couple of weeks.

If you have no thicket, you can always hie it to a good garden centre or nursery and look for a hardy evergreen tree in a pot. A potted tree also makes a good present along with or instead of a bottle of wine when you're invited out. Try to select healthy trees that are related to the indigenous ones, fir or spruce, for example, so that

when your friends plant them out in January they stand a better chance of survival.

Still on the subject of gifts: this month the dream-list seed catalogues arrive in all their super-natural glory. For plants and seeds, it is way better to order from local suppliers than those in another climate zone across the continent. There's a big incentive these days to grow older varieties. Some of the best are late 19th and early 20th Century varieties and hybrids available from West Coast Seeds and Island Seeds. Older heritage varieties often taste better than newer ones but may produce fewer flowers and smaller fruit.

For herbs the best by far are Richters in Ontario who have a huge collection that makes for an interesting read with a second cup of coffee. Caveat: if you wish to experiment do so on a small scale and be very wary about scattering seeds of non-indigenous wild plants that may take over your garden.

This may be an opportune time for me to vent a pet peeve. Seeds germinate and plants grow in a range of environments that gardeners and seed companies have designated into categories such as annual (those that germinate and flower in one calendar year); biennial (those that germinate in one year and flower in the next calendar year); and perennial (those that germinate one year to flower in the following few years). All very simple. Except that the designations are arbitrary and many of the new varieties break all the rules because they are engineered to be grown as annuals regardless of their genetic disposition. Thus for example: sweet peas, petunias, broccoli, onions and parsley are biennial or perennial if given half a chance.

And almost all the native flowers (and weeds) have already germinated in the rain as you read this rant and will grow through the winter and charge headlong into flower before next summer's drought. Which also means that it is far more efficient to pick winter weeds now

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instead of waiting until April when they are blowing seeds across your driveway.

Speaking of winter fun activities, any dry day is a good day to plant, prune, weed and mulch trees, bushes and perennial plants. Then, when you have finished all that, this is the prime time to make new paths, mend fences & pergolas, plan if not dig ponds, build sheds, greenhouses and tea-time gazebos. You can always sleep later.

Recipes

Since before recorded history Winter has been party time: Saturnalia, winter-fest, Yule, Christmas, callitwhatyouwanna. The ancient Greeks held great banquet feasts called Symposia where they drank, ate, drank, discussed philosophy and drank some more. (Read Plato for details.)

Archestratus has left us his favourite recipe for a fish dish.

Archestratus Fish Dish

Prep time 15-20 minutes, Cook for about 40 minute, Feeds a lot.

1 large fish such as salmon, cod or tuna, cleaned and skinned

Olive oil

Dry white wine

garlic, onions, rosemary, bay, thyme & parsley, chopped

Feta cheese

Place the fish in a large earthenware dish or baking pan. Slather with oil, liberally cover with the chopped herbs and lots of cheese. Gently pour the wine around the fish to about 2 centimeters deep taking care not to wash off the herbs. Place in a hot oven and bake for 35-45 minutes until cooked and browned on top.

If you are wise like Plato, you will also use the oven to bake a few loaves of bread at the same time. Serve with lashings of wine, hot bread, and discuss the meaning of life.

✿

During Saturnalia the Romans would feast for days snacking on finger food such as this favourite of Cato's:

Globi

Prep time about 20 minutes, Cook for 20 minutes, Makes about 25.

¼ Kilo Ricotta

About 1 cup of spelt or semolina, 1 egg, A pinch of salt, honey, lard, poppy seeds

Knead the cheese, flour, egg and salt into a dough as though you are making bread and allow this to rest for an hour. Heat the lard in a skillet or deep fryer (you can use

vegetable oil but lard is much better). Drop teaspoon sized balls of the dough into the fat and fry until golden brown. Drain on a towel and immediately dunk or paint with honey and roll in the seeds. For savory Globi omit the honey and roll in sesame seeds, salt & pepper. Serve hot with strong red wine. Goes well with a discussion on politics. ✿

Medieval etiquette demanded that you feed anyone who came to your door. From a 1393 cook book this is:

A Dish for Unexpected Guests

Prep & cooking time about 20 minutes

20 slices of cold meat such as beef, pork, pheasant, venison, etc

Several slices of fatty bacon chopped fine. Gently fry all the meat in a pan over the fire. While: you take 6 egg yolks and a little white wine and 'beat them together until you are tired.' Remove the pan from the fire and drain all the juices into the egg mix. Pour the sauce over the meat and return to the fire stirring constantly. Serve the meat and sauce on a platter with yesterday's left over bread and some apples. ✿

Ever the moralists Victorians invented many ways to keep the poor alive. From a section entitled 'Cheap Food Suitable to the Poor Man' in A Manual of Domestic Economy by JH Walsh, FRCS:

Liver Pudding:

Stew a pound & a half of liver in very little water for 1½ hours. Chop this into small pieces and mix with some bacon, beef or mutton fat, salt & pepper and put into a bowl. Make a crust of beef dripping and flour and cover the pudding. Boil for 2 hours. 'This with three pounds of potatoes, will make a dinner for a labouring man and his wife, together with five or six children for a price not exceeding one shilling.' ☞