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March Garden Calendar **The Good Life ~ Brian Crumblehulme**

In 1383 a wealthy Tuscan merchant, Francesco di Marco Datini, ordered a large new town house to be built in Prato near Florence. After the framing was finished and the roof on, he ordered a pleasure garden to be planted 'full of oranges, roses and violets and other lovely flowers.'

Medieval pleasure gardens were usually close to what we call the kitchen garden where food is grown separated by a low fence or hedge or sometimes a wall. Francesco evidently felt that his position justified a complete separation from menial duties, but it is interesting to note that his garden of fragrant flowers also contained the equally fragrant oranges.

A couple of generations earlier the famous palace of Alhambra in Granada built for the Sultan's Harem also contained orange and lemon trees, roses, lilacs, lilies, and of course, jasmine. Gardens like these, whether Catholic or Muslim, were positively sensuous.

We do not have the climate of Tuscany or Granada just yet but with a little careful planning we can create equally charming and fragrant outdoor rooms for summer use.

You will need a deer-proof space close to the house, preferably one with a southern aspect. If the location is on hard conglomerate rock you might want to investigate junipers, dwarf pines, myrtle, and olives. It's amazing what will flourish on rock with a little coaxing. Thirty years ago I planted a cliff top with fragrant herbs: lavender, rosemary, thyme, oregano and germander, and they are still there! The bees love them and the deer avoid them.

Many of the older varieties of roses are moderately drought resistant as are perennial poppies, geraniums, jasmine, oleander and lemon trees. Grapes and kiwi vines will take the heat with only a little supplementary water, and with a little winter care oleanders and citrus

will thrive. I have had oleanders outside all winter for a couple of years and this year marks the inauguration of my citrus grove.

Oranges require a warm growing period and a warm or hot ripening period before they become sweet enough to eat. I am saving space in my greenhouse for a couple of oranges that can be espaliered against the north wall and left to ripen through fall. Limes and lemons, by contrast, do not develop much sugar and so do not require a Californian sun before you can pick them. What they do require is a dry, sunny and sheltered location where they will not freeze in winter. Most citrus will take a few degrees of frost but will die if the ground freezes as it does every couple of years or so. Lots of mulch, a blanket and a trouble light with a 100 watt bulb will take care of that for the couple of weeks when Alberta pays us a visit.

On a more pedestrian level this is the month to sow and plant all those basic vegetables for summer fall and winter use. An early sowing means early maturing which means less summer watering which means less work. Potatoes produce tubers on the stem so they will have to be earthed up or your harvest will be green. If the soil is light and well drained potatoes are best planted in a trench and filled in as they grow. If the earth is cold clay then place the seed potatoes on top and gradually heap over straw and compost. Carrots sown now will be ready to eat in May but if some are left in the ground they will continue to grow through summer and fall and remain sweet even in winter. Carrots sown later in the season are more susceptible to attack by carrot fly. Beets and parsnips too should be sown now for use through next winter and early spring. March is also the best time to sow tomatoes, peppers and eggplant under glass or on an east facing window ledge. My early cherry tomatoes are about three inches high now but the main crop are just flexing their cotyledons (baby leaves).

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Spring Recipes

Sand Daps On A Bed Of Nettles

Prep time 30 minutes, Cooking time 20 minutes

- 3 Tbls butter
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 1 clove chopped garlic
- 1 large bunch fresh nettle tops
- Salt, pepper & nutmeg to taste
- 2 cups water and/or white wine
- ½ tsp corn starch or rice flour
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 8 Sand dap fillets or 4 sole fillets
- 1 beaten egg
- ½ cup corn meal

Melt the butter in a saucepan, add the onion and garlic and fry gently until transparent. Add the nettles, spices and water and simmer gently for about ten minutes. Add the cornstarch and blend until smooth, then add the cream. Keep warm.

Meanwhile: heat the oil in a large skillet. Pat dry the sand dap fillets, dip in the beaten egg, coat with corn meal and cook in the hot oil for two minutes only. Turn and fry for a further minute. Drain and serve immediately on the nettle sauce. For lunch on the patio serve with thick fresh buttered slices of bread and a spring salad followed by lemon bougatsia and hot tea.

Spring Salad

Prep time 10 minutes

- 1 large bunch of wild or mixed greens such as arugula, mesclun or watercress
- 1 apple or 1 orange
- A dash of olive oil
- A dash of raspberry vinegar
- salt, sugar, pepper and cayenne to taste
- sliced and toasted almonds

Wash, shake dry and tear the salad mix into a bowl. Chop a green apple and rinse in lemon juice, or peel and chop one orange. Add the fruit to the greens. Prepare the dressing. If you use an apple include a dash of cayenne, do not use cayenne on an orange. Toss all together and top with a drift of toasted almonds. ☺