

There's still time to plant a herb garden

The fragrance wafting from the Market Place in Hudson's Oakland Mall was enough to set the most jaded palates, the most depressed appetites, on edge.

Yvonne Gill-Davis, proprietor of Tweeny's Cafe in Birmingham, was back, sharing her expertise on fresh herbs. The delicious smells were a blend of the various potted herbs she had brought for inspection and the cooking smells as she used these herbs in a variety of dishes.

To describe the two-hour class as one in cooking with herbs would be too limiting. In addition to the cooking demonstration, Ms. Gill explained the basics of growing and harvesting fresh herbs. Since this is the time of year when many people are inspired to start or expand herb gardens, this approach was particularly timely.

Hardy perennials, those which will survive a winter outdoors and come up the following year, may be planted from early April on. Tender perennials, those which should winter outdoors on a sunny window sill or in a greenhouse, are planted in mid-May. Mid-May planting also is indicated for annuals, which need to be replanted each year.

ANYONE desirous of raising only a select few herbs may grow them in a pot or planter sufficiently deep to al-

low for good root development.

A more ambitious, but still basic garden was outlined for an 8x10-foot plot.

The plants she recommended were: Hardy perennials: Two French tarragon, one English thyme, one lemon thyme, one winter savory, one Greek oregano, one chives, one curly parsley, one sage, four sorrel and one sweet cicely.

Tender perennials: One rosemary, one bay, one curry plant, one pineapple sage, and one marjoram.

Annuals: Two basil, one chervil, one cilantro, and one Florence fennel.

THE IMPORTANT thing for the gardener to keep in mind is that herbs need full sun. About six hours of sun per day are required to develop the oils in herbs, which, when released, impart the herb's characteristic flavor to foods.

It is in order to release these oils that herbs are minced, torn or crushed before being added to foods. Whole leaves or stalks are left intact only when used as a garnish, rather than for flavor.

The length of time herbs should be cooked to optimally extract their flavor depends on the type of herb used.

Perennials with their woody, non-edible stems, have a robust flavor and can withstand a long cooking time. Annuals with their more delicate fla-



vor, usually are added at the end of the cooking time.

Incidentally, although perennial stems are non-edible, they are flavorful and need not be wasted. It was suggested that they be used to flavor soups and stocks. Tarragon stalks may even be placed in the cavity of a chicken about to be roasted to impart the compatible flavor of this herb to the bird as it cooks.

ALTHOUGH THOSE who are familiar with herbs soon develop a sense for the amount to be used, the novice needs some guidance.

Yvonne Gill suggested, as rule of thumb, to start by using ½ tea spoon of minced fresh herbs or one me-

dium bay leaf or a two-inch sprig of thyme for each four portions.

Another helpful rule of thumb is to use half as much dried as fresh herbs.

Anyone who is not already an herb gardener and who hesitates to undertake such a task should read over the following sampling of Yvonne Gill's recipes. If they read even half as intently as they smelled and looked as she prepared them, you should be spurred into action.

Personally, I am dusting off the herb-growing book I borrowed from my mother two years ago with the best intentions in the world. If I can't grow a garden successfully after this kind of inspiration, she can have her book back.

A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

Since I am (currently) feeling optimistic, however, about your success as well as my own in this venture, I will devote next week's column to harvesting and preserving the herb crop.

ARTICHOKE HEARTS WITH MUSHROOMS AND MARJORAN

3 large fresh artichokes
12 large white mushroom caps
1 lemon
½ cup chicken stock
½ cup heavy cream
4 tbsp. olive oil ½ tsp. salt
1 tsp. minced marjoram leaves
2 branches marjoram
10 grinds white pepper

Bring cream, chicken stock and marjoram branches to a slow boil. Simmer 3 to 4 minutes, remove from heat and hold. Wipe mushrooms with a damp cloth or peel and cut into ½-inch slices. Prepare artichokes by snapping off outside leaves until central white cone is exposed. Rub cut surfaces with lemon juice to prevent discoloration. Slice 1½ inches from the bottom and top and remove the choke with a sharp edged spoon. Slice the artichoke into lengthwise ¼-inch slices and rub with lemon juice.

Heat two tablespoons olive oil in heavy skillet and add sliced artichokes. Lightly brown on all sides then remove and add remainder of the olive oil. Brown the mushrooms lightly. Return the artichokes to the pan with the mushrooms before straining the liquid cream mixture into the pan. Simmer over low heat for 5 minutes until artichokes are soft but still crisp.

Increase heat, add salt, pepper and marjoram and reduce the liquids until a coating consistency is reached.

NOTE: This would make a nice vegetarian luncheon dish. It could also be served as a separate course at dinner or accompany some plain meat. Yvonne Gill suggested that it accompany charcoal broiled chicken breasts with an herb butter. Someone in the class thought it also would be delicious served with crab.



Byrd's Kitchen

by Vivian Byrd

A note to chocolate lovers

Chocolate lovers, this one's for you. Experience says that includes everyone except those unlucky persons who are allergic to chocolate.

Chocolate dominates the flavor pack when it comes to desserts or sweet treats. Think for a moment of the last time you walked into a candy store. Remember the lines of trays or jars of candies? How many of them were chocolate?

A "little bite of something sweet" to finish off lunch is so often a small (or maybe large) bar of chocolate; and those sweet cravings we all get are frequently for something chocolate.

The dried, roasted and polished "nibs" or almonds of the cacao bean are crushed and the resulting thick liquor is, if of good quality, about 50 percent cocoa fat. When the liquor is partially defatted, it is cooled and solidifies into a hard block, known as bitter chocolate.

This is the type that is used for baking in this country. The cooking chocolate most generally used in England and France is a mixture of the chocolate liquor with some of the fat removed and sugar added.

In England, this is known as pure chocolate, the same as what we know as bittersweet chocolate. Milk chocolate has powdered or condensed milk added to the sweetened chocolate and is variously flavored with vanilla, almond, cinnamon, etc.

Chocolate used in confectionery for candies has added amounts of cocoa fat. When most of the cocoa fat is extracted from the chocolate liquor, the chocolate block that results is powdered into cocoa, which contains only 18 percent fat.

Chocolate was brought to Europe by the Spaniards, who had discovered it in Mexico in 1519. Its use spread through Europe soon after.

Brillat-Savarin, a French politician and gastronome, called it one of the most effective restoratives. For "all those who have to work when they might be sleeping, merit who feel temporarily deprived of their intellectual powers, those who find the weather oppressive, time dragging, the atmosphere depressing; those who are tormented by some preoccupation which deprives them of the liberty of thought," he recommended imbibing a half-litre of chocolate ambre.

He was referring to ambre gris, a greyish substance that exudes a small analogous to musk, and not the yellow amber that is an entirely different thing. Such chocolate no longer exists.

For all of us who get the chocolate "crazies," a level of craving that goes far beyond the occasional impulse to bite into a Raisinet or dig into a box of bon-bons, below are some recipes that have proved quite satisfying.

MINTED HOT CHOCOLATE

½ tsp. mint flakes
4½ cups milk
¼ cup sugar
¼ cup cocoa
¼ tsp. salt
¼ cup water
2 tsp. vanilla extract

Heat mint flakes with milk, only until hot. Cover and steep while making the syrup. Mix the next 5 ingredients together in a 2-quart saucepan. Bring to boiling point and boil 2 minutes, stirring frequently. Pour hot milk through a sieve to strain out mint flakes. Add to the syrup. Heat only until hot, stirring to prevent a skin from forming over the top. Serve hot with whipped cream or a marshmallow, if desired. Makes 8 servings.

CHOCOLATE BREAD PUDDING

½ tsp. salt
¼ tsp. ground cloves
¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
½ cup sugar
1 cup soft bread crumbs
2½ cups hot milk
2 tsp. vanilla extract
2 tbsp. butter or margarine
2 squares (2 oz.) unsweetened chocolate

¼ cup cold milk
2 large egg whites
Meringue for 8-inch pie

Combine first 5 ingredients. Add hot milk, vanilla extract, and butter or margarine. Melt chocolate over hot water and add. Combine cold milk with egg yolks and add. Turn into a buttered 1-quart casserole. Bake in a preheated slow oven (325°) 45 minutes or until knife inserted in the center comes out clean. Top with meringue. Bake 15 minutes or until golden. Makes 6 servings.

SOFT MERINGUE

8-inch pie
¼ tsp. salt
2 large egg whites
4 tbsp. sugar
¼ tsp. vanilla extract

Add salt to egg whites. Beat until soft peaks form when the beater is raised. Beat in sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time. Continue beating until stiff peaks form when the beater is raised. Beat in vanilla extract. Spoon meringue over cold filling, sealing the inside edge of crust.

Bake in a preheated slow oven (325°) for 15 minutes. If meringue is spread over a warm filling, bake in a preheated hot oven (400°) for 10 minutes. Cool on wire rack away from draft.

CHILLED CHOCOLATE LOAF

½ lb. semisweet chocolate, cut in small pieces
¼ cup rum
16 tbsp. (¼ lb.) soft unsalted butter
2 tsp. "superfine" sugar
2 eggs, separated
1½ cups grated blanched almonds (about 5 oz.)
pinch of salt
12 butter biscuits (Petits Beurre or Social Tea), cut into 1-½-½-inch pieces
Confectioners' sugar
¼ cup heavy cream, whipped

Lightly grease the bottom and sides of a 1½-quart loaf pan with vegetable oil and invert the pan over paper towels to drain. In a heavy one-two quart saucepan, melt the chocolate over low heat, stirring constantly. When all the chocolate is dissolved, stir in the rum and remove the pan from the heat. Cool to room temperature.

Cream the soft butter by beating it vigorously against the sides of a large, heavy mixing bowl until it is light and fluffy. Beat in the sugar and then the egg yolks, one at a time. Stir in the grated almonds and cooled chocolate. In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites and salt with a rotary beater or wire whisk until they are stiff enough to cling to the beater in soft peaks. With a rubber spatula, fold them into the chocolate mixture. When no streaks of white show, gently fold in the cut-up biscuits, discarding the biscuit crumbs. Spoon the mixture into the greased loaf pan and smooth the top with a spatula to spread it evenly. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or until the loaf is very firm.

Unmold the loaf an hour or so before serving time. To do so, run a sharp knife around the sides of the pan and dip the bottom into hot water for a few seconds. Place a chilled serving platter upside down over the pan and, grasping both sides, quickly turn the plate and pan over. Tap the plate on the table, the loaf should slide out easily. If it does not, repeat the whole process. Smooth the top and sides of the unmolded loaf with a metal spatula, then return it to the refrigerator. Just before serving, sieve a little confectioners' sugar over the top. Cut the loaf into thin slices and serve it, if desired, with whipped cream.

Letters are welcomed and should be addressed to Vivian Byrd, P.O. Box 1024, Birmingham 48012. Please include a stamped, self-addressed reply envelope.

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