

29 January 2015 Garden Column

Spring Fever: Early Onset

When we have one of those delightfully balmy days that can delude us into thinking winter is over, we go outside and scuff around in our small wilderness. And you know, most properties have a benignly neglected corner where the wild things linger. One harbinger of spring that rewards the scuffing is the sight of the tiny nubs that belong to emerging May Apple. They resemble the eraser on a lead pencil, only slightly shiny.

May Apple or Mandrake is *Podophyllum peltatum*, a woodland wildflower native to a large part of the eastern United States. The foot high large leaves, deep green, deeply divided, come in pairs forming an umbrella that fairly well hides the flower growing in the crotch where the leaves emerge. The flower is white, a little larger than a quarter and has six to nine petals.

I have small colonies of this pretty plant but I have never seen the fruit, a large lemon-like berry that is edible. Curiously, the *Podophyllum* belongs to the barberry family, *Berberidaceae*.

Two or three balmy days in a row send gardeners to their catalog cache and lists. The desire to see something growing feeds imaginations resulting in unrealistic visions of fields and orchards! Even when brought down to earth, growing delicious food is possible. It might be said that Virginians have a special responsibility to plant a few fruits and vegetables.

The parts of our country that have been providing the rest of us with abundant crops of healthy fresh food have been stricken by severe drought in several past years. Rather than expecting the rains to come, many experts see the likelihood of continued drought. We are blessed with a weather pattern that although it can behave contrarily in some years, can usually be relied on for sufficient rain to grow crops.

One of the most interesting current 'farming' techniques designed to elude 'weather' is hydroponic crop-growing, a system with controlled air temperature, rainwater collected and controlled for acidity and treated with fertilizer, iron, and dissolved oxygen. There is a hydroponic greenhouse near the Pennsylvania/New Jersey border producing 125 tons of produce a year and with plans for expansion. There are also additional plans to build hydroponic greenhouses in the impoverished neighborhoods of the District of Columbia. How exciting to see the potential for providing fresh produce to the healthy-food-deserts of large cities!

One factor of these greenhouses is that varieties do not have to be selected on their ability to survive a cross-country trip, but on their taste. It has been said that 90% of America's lettuce comes from California and Arizona. With all the clever entrepreneurs studying systems used in other countries, it won't be long before most of our food will be close to 'local'.

For true home grown, we can look no further than our own back yards. Even if your sunniest spot is the middle of your driveway, you can hoist a container into a garden cart or onto any derelict contrivance with wheels so it can be rolled out of the way and into the sun. One advantage of growing vegetables in container is that rabbits can't reach them and you can prevent pests from moving in from neighboring patches.

A careful perusal of catalogs will provide a list of varieties most adaptable to being container grown. You can have a bountiful harvest from a very small garden using all manner of troughs, bins, pots. Some of these clever devices are well made, practical, and expensive. They will last for years, probably decades! If you consider the money spent on indifferent produce, you may find one of these containers an excellent investment. Some of them come with sophisticated watering systems as well as wheels. One company where they are a specialty is

Gardeners Supply (gardeners.com) that is 100% employee owned and stresses customer service and satisfaction.

For people with limited space, sharing a garden is another way to healthy food. Perhaps your neighbor has a sunny place for a small garden but has too little time to tend a garden single-handed. The pooling of time, tools, and talent can produce good exercise, delicious food, and fine friendships.