

The Anti-Sugarplum Diet

This is the time of year when you rarely get into your car without precariously stowing something edible. At the December meeting of the Master Gardeners we ate greatly and among the laden dessert table was a small bar called Basler Leckerli, the recipe for which I yen. Another delight was a box of doughnuts that defy description. In fact when you looked at them you didn't think doughnut, but wedding cake.

One of the traditions of the season is glorious food but for those people who can gain weight reading the recipe, too many opportunities to indulge results in a January battle to shed those holiday pounds.

Vegetables are filling so before sallying forth to the next buffet, have a cup of tea and a plate of chopped fresh greens, cooked to crisp with a touch of onion or a hint of garlic. Or if you arrive unfed, begin on the raw vegetables. One appealing thing about potluck is the need to sample each of the delicious contributions brought by friends!

If you are truly dedicated to the environment, you may welcome this suggestion for eradicating our area's invasive reed-weed, phragmites: "Eat them!" This recipe for roasted phragmites rhizomes came from VIMS via e-mail. Either dig them from your own property or do a favor for the county and find them along the roadside ditches. Find about 12 rhizomes, each about six to eight inches long. Scrub them well and bake at 350 degrees for 25 to 30 minutes. I have been told they taste like baked potato jackets. Should you serve them with sour cream and chives, do you think?

My favorite part of a baked potato is the skin, so this sounds like a good idea. The opposite end of the phragmites has the potential for good and healthy eating as well. This dish begins with a walk on the wild side to collect a dozen or so seedheads from the tall plants. Remove the seeds and crush them. I presume a rolling pin will do the job since the recipe does not mention grinding them. To each half-cup of seeds add two cups of boiling water. Cover them and cook slowly until a thin red gruel is formed. Cool and eat: milk and maple syrup compliment the dish.

An expedition to find dinner might provide diversion for school vacationers. Most youngsters don't have the same exposure their grandparents had to the many sources of food. They may have never pulled a carrot from the ground, wiped it on a shirt tail and eaten it. Of course, your grandparents didn't know the names of all those germs and had been told they were fated to eat a peck of dirt anyway. (Is knowing that there are eight quarts in a peck and four pecks in a bushel still important for third grade math tests?)

The great 'outside' is seductive and children who have read the adventures of the boy who lived in a hallowed out tree, "My Side of the Mountain" may try to make sassafras tea in the attic, so parental guidance is essential.

The hunting season, too, lures people outside. Even those without hunters in the family can find markets and restaurants that are giving attention to game as an alternative to other meats. I have read that chefs are featuring bison burgers, alligator medallions, and braised kangaroo, as well as trying new approaches to preparing deer, elk, wild boar, and rabbit. It is probably healthier to eat game since it has not been closely confined, given antibiotics, hormones or steroids. Game is also healthy as it has fewer calories and less saturated fat.

We know vegetables and fruits are good for us but it is curious to learn that they are also good for the planet. Scientific analysis of the effect on climate warming made by specific parts of our diets has found that the things to avoid as having the most negative impact on our health and that of our planet are lamb, beef, cheese, pork, and farmed salmon. It is rather surprising to see lamb and cheese listed, although the others have been examined under the health lens for decades. We need to search for the foods grown sustainably such as grass-fed beef and other organic products. To balance the financial budget as well as the nutritional budget, we may find ourselves enjoying more hearty soups with cornbread or batterbread. The prep time of these comfort foods is less formidable when you divide the time by the number of warm-ups they provide.

A question: Who is eating the blooms off my pansy plants? Do cats enjoy them? Since the ones in tall pots remain, probably it is not deer.