

Hold That Spice – in high regard

Wasn't it just days ago that we were moaning our concerns about gardening in drought and heat? And suddenly Christmas cards are arriving unsolicited in the mail to beguile us into donating, ordering – right now in October! For those of us for whom time gallops anyway, it is disconcerting to have Hallowe'en, Thanksgiving, and Christmas preparations hammering at the door. Not that we do not love holidays, but each in its own time to savor at its own pace, to enjoy to the fullest, not to be swept into the dustbin to make room for the next big commercial extravaganza.

Each season, each holiday has its fragrance. There is no need for those plug-in or candle-lit devices to perfume the house when your home is equipped with stove or oven. The spicy smells of cooking welcome and comfort and excite! Just like the other members of the animal kingdom, humans use their sense of smell as a guide to avoid pain and enhance pleasure.

During those times in our history when sanitation was primitive or nonexistent, spices were in great demand. Surely if England and Germany could have a “cod” war over the teaming richness of cod in Icelandic waters in 1532, there were probably spice wars as adventurers searched the world for these splendid additions to health and tastiness.

Oregano, the word, comes from the Greek, “oros ganos” or joy of the mountain as the herb grows most lavishly on Turkish mountainsides. Spain produces wild thyme, chicory grows in Lebanon and capers in Syria. Albania has the finest sage and the Moluccas, those fabled Spice Islands between the Philippines and New Guinea were once the only place where the trees producing nutmeg and cloves would grow. The seed of the nutmeg has a covering that is ground for mace, which you may suspect as both have an affinity for apple pie. Now antiques, those small, fine graters, were essential for our foremothers as nutmegs came as nuts.

I have read that when Magellan organized his world cruise in the 1520s he paid the bill by selling Moluccan cloves. Hard to believe but after the Dutch captured the Spice Islands, spices were actually worth their weight in gold. Nothing is more easily hidden than a seed so eventually clove plantations were established in the Indian Ocean. Today the small island of Zanzibar is the prime producer of cloves, those necessities for pumpkin pie.

The vanilla bean, essential to the world's favorite ice cream is found in a long pod on a climbing orchid. That surely gives the lie to “just plain vanilla”---rather, “wonderful, exotic vanilla.” Originally from Latin America, today two-thirds of the crop is still grown on small mountain farms in wild rain forests. This is one small reason to protect those natural resources, whose mysteries we have not finished exploring.

When the vanilla bean orchid was transplanted to a similar eco-system in Africa, the newly opened flower had to be pollinated by hand. They had been unable to transport the wee wild bee that did the job in Latin America.

With even the smallest garden or widest windowsill, some herbs and spices can be available fresh year round, such as parsley, basil, chives, thyme or oregano. The same plant that supplies bay leaves can be grown as an ornamental shrub. I don't know how large it may grow in the right zone as mine died back each winter so after a few years I replanted it in a pot and brought it inside. It survives, doesn't flourish.

If you or someone in your family has been warned away from excess salt, you are probably experimenting with herbs and spices to add flavor. Spices do not last for years: they lose power and may even become moldy so buy in small quantities and keep in a dark drawer not on a spice rack exposed to bright light (like mine, sigh).

cabbages & kings

If you waste a little time doing the celebrity cipher with your morning coffee you saw Mark Twain's comment: “Don't go around saying the world owes you a living. The world owes you nothing. It was here first.” Do you think that old-fashioned humility is the core of environmentalism?