

## Remember The Birds

On a bitter windy day, the nearest we want to come to gardening is to plan or to dream. And in the planning choose the native plants that provide for wildlife. Don't forget how valuable the cones are on deciduous and evergreen cedars, cypress, hemlock, pines, firs, larches, spruces and junipers. (Those juniper 'berries' are actually tiny cones.)

Weren't you pleased that you had left the seedpods and grasses intact when you saw them etched in ice? The birds thank you, too. The term 'on ice' surely indicated the demise of those darling buds of May that rushed into bloom in January. Wasn't the landscape beautiful? But like long-lost second cousins on a protracted visit, it was lovely to see it come, even lovelier to see it go.

It left me with a question: I have twin hollies at the opposite corners of the house. Both were bend under a burden of red berries and glittering ice but when a flock of robins swooped in for a feast, only one of the trees was touched. It was a wonderful sight – ice bits flying in every direction and robins, those bubbas of bird-dom elbowing each other off twigs and branches. They flew off: not a berry left. The other tree has every berry still in place. Odd.

### A History Note

I finished out a copy of "Brother Cadfael's Herb Garden" to send to a friend who was escaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century by rereading Ellis Peter's (Edith Pargeter 1913-1995) gentle mysteries centered on the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Benedictine abbey at Shrewsbury, England.

Since, when he is not solving mysteries, Brother Cadfael is tending his extensive herb garden and concocting cures for his ailing neighbors, the series of novels have a curious interplay of history and folk medicine.

Although references to herbs are found in early writings from Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China, the classical texts of Greece and Rome were the dominant source of medical and scientific knowledge. It is interesting that in "*De Materia Medica*" written by Pedanius Dioscorides c. AD 64, there were descriptions of over 500 plants in a text that remained a reference for over a millennium and a half.

The connection between gardens and monasteries was firmly established by the Emperor Charlemagne (c. 742-814) who was so impressed by the health of the people served by the herb garden at a Benedictine monastery in Switzerland that he ordered that all monasteries have herb gardens. In his famous "Decree concerning towns," Charlemagne listed 80 plants and fruit trees that should be in every town.

In England the use of herbal medicine predates the Roman invasion, a mix of plain folklore and druidic mystery Celtic Christianity held that through love of nature one could experience the Creator, making gardening a holy occupation, as well as a necessary one.

## Cabbages & Kings

Take two and call me in the morning? The news has been around for a while that aspirin is good for plants. Reports have drifted into print that a weak solution, 1 1/2 adult aspirins to 2 gallons of water, will benefit tomatoes and basil by making them larger and healthier. Both plants and soil were sprayed every three weeks with the solution.

Aspirin is salicylic acid, the substance that plants make to trigger natural defenses against bacteria, fungi and viruses. You might like to experiment on other crops to see if you notice any difference in their health and vigor.

There is actually a low-carb potato! That seems an oxymoron, doesn't it? Developed in Holland this spud is now being sold by a Florida potato growers' cooperative. It is said to have 30% fewer carbohydrates than the standard 'Russet Burbank.' All this and it is creamy, moist and looks as if it had already been buttered! If carbs do not concern you there is always the addition of butter and sour cream.

Even more mind-boggling is the news that sweet potatoes are being grown by Toyota Motor Company in Indonesia. No, not to feed the employees but to process into a bioplastic for use as car parts. This is good news if it works since it would relieve petroleum of its role in making plastics.