

the pits

WHAT'S IN THE MARKET

Antemoya, Carambola, Cherimoya, Cippolini, Bitter melon, Black sapote, Date, Guava, Horned melon, Kumquat, Lemon grass, Loquat, Mango, Olive, Papaya, Persimmon, Pomegranate. Passion fruit, Prickly pear, Tamarillo, Waternuts. Keep an eye out for White sapote.

SEEDS

This month Bob Jurgens is offering Crepe myrtle from his own tree. (This is not a pit, but an ornamental tree for zone 7-9), Carob, Bitter melon, and Passiflora lutea (it bears edible yellow fruits).

If you are interested send, \$1.00 per packet and an SASE envelope to: Bob Jurgens, 116-32 227th St., Cambria Heights, NY 11411. Checks should be made payable to the Rare Pit and Plant Council.



HOLIDAY GIFTS

We have been combing the catalogs, nurseries, and book stores for months looking for some hot new item for our gardening friends. To date we have not found the *hot* new item. What follows is a listing of our favorite plant and tool catalogs.

Logee's Greenhouses: 141 North St. Danielson, CT 06239 (203) 774-803). They offer truly rare, flowering houseplants and quite a few pits. The catalog costs \$3.00, (refundable with the first purchase) is in full color and has good cultural directions.

Merry Gardens: Camden ME 94843 (207 - 236-9064) We always order "Living Herbal Wreaths" and "Berry bowls" for special friends and relatives. They also have an extensive list of scented geraniums, ivies and cool growing houseplants.

Raintree Nursery: 391 Butts Rd. Morton, WA 98356 (206) 496-6400. Most of the plants are hardy (to the Northwest) fruit and nut bearing trees, but they also have an extensive list of citrus plants for indoor culture.

South Seas Nursery: PO Box 4974, Ventura, CA 93004 (805) 647-6990. They have a small but solid list of exotic rare fruits. The plants arrive in "liners" and are ready to be transplanted to 4-5 gal. containers.

Walt Nicke's Garden Talk: 36 McLeod Ln. PO Box 433, Topsfield, MA 01983 (508-887-3388) They offer a superb line of garden tools, bird feeders, and a small selection of inexpensive gardening books.

Woodlanders: 1128 Colleton Ave. Aiken, SC 298801. A unique nursery that specializes in native plants for southeastern gardens. They have one of the most extensive and carefully selected book offerings available. They do offer some Pits that are hardy to zones 7-10.

BLACK SAPOTE

Diospyros digyna syn *D. ebenaster*

Ebenaceae

Black sapote is an old friend of ours that has not been available in the New York markets for several years. To our great surprise, however, we found the fruits in the humongous Stop and Shop in Cohasset, MA. The fruits are the size and shape of a large tomato and are luscious emerald green. They are ripe when they yield to the touch much as an avocado or a peach. Ours were so unripe that they felt like wood. They have been "ripening" on a sunny window sill for three weeks and are slowly softening up.

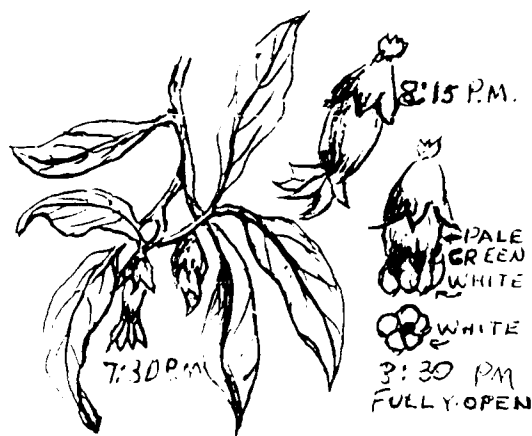
Black sapotes are a type of persimmon and have five, petaled calyx at the bud end of the fruit. One of the ways to hasten ripening of Japanese persimmons, is to put them in the freezer for 24 hours; when they thaw, they are dead ripe. We tried this technique with one of the three sapotes we bought. Alas, all we had was a frozen chunk of woody-like fruit.

The flesh, when ripe is the color of axle grease and has a similar texture. (One of the common names for this plant is the chocolate pudding tree). The fruit has a slight taste of chocolate, but is otherwise rather bland. However, a dynamite desert can be made by adding a ¼ tsp of creme de cacao and some whipped cream. It looks and tastes like a chocolate mousse. The leathery rind if carefully cut can be used as a serving cup.

Black sapotes are native to both coasts of Mexico. In this country they are primarily grown as an ornamental curiosity in South Florida. They are beautiful, slow-growing, evergreen trees that develop a dense crown of dark glossy green leaves that make a stunning contrast with the jet black trunk. The plants are usually dioecious (needing both male and female plants for fruit). The ½" (1.2 cm) white, tubular flowers are borne in clusters at the leaf axils. It is said that the male flowers have a fragrance similar to gardenias while the female flowers are said to have very little fragrance. (Marty Biesc flowered one on a western window sill in Mid-town Manhattan, but failed to sniff the flower.)

Within the flesh, there are 5-7 shiny, ½" (1.2 cm) black seeds. These can be sown immediately or cleaned and stored in an air tight jar for several months. The seedlings can be sown in flats or individual small pots. Sow the seeds about one inch beneath the surface of the soil, loosely cover the container with plastic wrap to insure humidity and place the containers in a warm dark spot. Germination usually takes 10-21 days. You can speed up the germination process, if you give them some gentle bottom heat. When the seedlings are 4" (10 cm) tall and have at least two sets of true leaves, transplant them to 4" (10 cm) pots and grow them in bright light, but not direct sunlight for several months. As the plants mature, move them to large pots and grow on a sunny southern window sill.

Random note: The ebenaster family contains only 2 genera of which *Diospyros* is most notable. Ebony wood is dark and extremely hard and used for piano keys. *Diospyros ebenum* is the ebony of commerce: *D. montana* and *D. haplostylis* are also used. Marbled striped and banded woods are produced from *D. marmorata*. Others such as our native *D. virginiana*, the Japanese *D. kaki* and the hardy *D. lotus* all produce edible fruits.

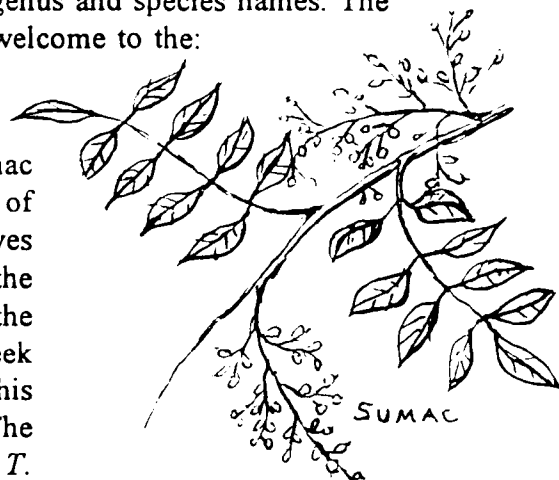


ALL IN THE FAMILY

In our meandering through the horticultural literature and especially in The New Royal Horticultural Society Dictionary of Gardening we have been struck by common themes or appearances of various families of plants and flowers. We thought that our readers might enjoy a look at some and so we begin a new series of unsystematic occasional examinations of various plant families. We were casting around for a synonym for family like grouping or class when we were reminded that botany family has a highly specific meaning and no synonym can be used. Each family is divided into genera (the plural of genus) and each genus is divided into species. Plants are generally named by their genus and species names. The family name invariably ends in "ae", usually "eae". And so welcome to the:

ANACARDIACEAE

Commonly known as the Cashew family or the Sumac family, the *Anacardiaceae* has 73 genera and 850 species of trees, shrubs and vines. This family has several representatives of commercial importance but what struck us was how often the sap of the plants was toxic. This is most often recognized in the genus *Toxicodendron* that takes its name from the Greek "toxicos" meaning poisonous and "dendron" meaning tree. This genus was formerly included in the genus *Rhus* (Sumac). The most important of these are *T. radicans* (poison ivy) and *T. diversiloba* (Western poison oak). Others include *T. vernicifluum* (varnish tree) and *T. vernix* (poison sumac). Bruising a leaf or any other part of the plant releases 3-n-pentadecycatechol, an irritating oil causing a red itchy vesicular rash that appears 12-24 hours after exposure and lasts 4-5 days. Not everyone is sensitive to these plants but we believe that almost everyone will become so with repeated exposure. At one point certain English gardens cultivated poison ivy for its excellent fall color. It is said that the average hired gardener in this situation lasted about 6 weeks.



Learn to recognize the plants you are likely to encounter in your region. Poison ivy has 3 shiny heart shaped leaflets with a smooth or occasionally notched edge about 3 cm long and not quite as wide. It grows as a shrub or vine and has grey berries on the female plants (these plants are usually dioecious). Poison sumac has pinnately compound leaves and grey berries and grows in swampy conditions. Both of these plants have brilliant fall color. We have little experience with western poison oak and *T. vernicifluum* whose sap can be used for varnish is an oriental tree.






If you contact one of these plants wash with strong soap as soon as possible and wash your clothes. Incidentally The New RHS Dictionary is dead wrong when it states that burning the plant is safe. The oil incorporated into the smoke is highly toxic. If you want to kill the plant a biodegradable product like glyphosate (Roundup, Monsanto) is more effective than trying to pull it.

Some other toxic members of this family include *Cotinus coggygria* (smoke tree) a Southeastern native grown for its fall color, *Semecarpus anacardium* (marking nut tree) and *Smodingium argutum* (African poison oak). *Lithrea caustica* produces a toxic sap used in curing leather. *Schinus molle* (pepper tree) produces edible red peppercorns which are quite irritating to the mucous membranes of some. ▶


A friend of ours was recently stranded at home and, lacking food, consumed a can of cashews. He developed an itchy red rash that the doctor diagnosed as poison ivy, even though he had never left the house. The cashew (*Anacardium occidentale*) produces a nut surrounded by a fleshy coating containing caustic phenols.

The most interesting and important of the toxic plants is *Mangifera indica* (mango). The incidence of sensitivity to this queen of tropical fruits must be much lower than that for poison ivy but the sap close to the base of the fruit, and from the trunk and branches and unripe fruit skin is said to be an irritant. Julia Morton in Fruits of Warm Climates recommends using two knives - one to peel the skin and a second to cut the fruit. Itchy eyes, facial swelling and respiratory difficulties are reported to be common when the tree is in bloom. Incidentally; *Never burn mango wood.*

We have focussed on the toxic properties of this family but numerous members are not toxic including *Pistacia vera* (pistachio) and the sumacs still residing in the genus *Rhus*. *John Hart*

   **SEASONAL TIP**  

When deciduous trees loose their leaves, the broad-leaved and needle-leaved evergreen shrubs loose their shade protection. To prevent winter sun scorch and protect them from the cold, dry desiccating winds of winter; spray the leaves with anti-desiccant. This is a totally safe, bio-degradable product. In our neck of the woods it is sold under the name of "Wilt-Proof". This treatment should be repeated during a mid-winter thaw when night-time temperatures are above 38°.

We use this product in Scituate, MA where our shrubs are exposed to heavy salt-laden winds and anti-desiccant works better than any other methods we have tried.. One of our neighbors wraps his entire yard in burlap. This becomes laden with salt and is a case where the cure is worse than the disease. 

NOTES FROM AFAR

Member Dan Milkusky, the first computer expert to drag us into the 20th century is now in Japan ... Dragging the Japanese into the 21st???? We received a postcard from Singapore extolling the joys of the tropical fruit markets of Asia. "Durian is not allowed on buses or subways. Half of the population loves it, the other half hates it."

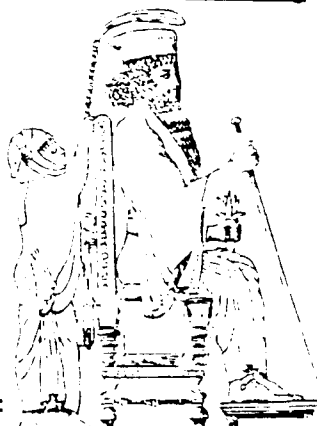
The odds at home are not so different. Your editor loves it. Dr. John will not allow the fruit in the house. I have to keep it outside in the garden ... even the freezer is off limits.

Life is the Pits

If life is the pits
than it is of great worth
because a pit becomes a plant
which enhances the earth.
It grows and it blossoms
and I wouldn't mind a bit
if my life was fruit bearing
and resembled a pit.

Rita P. Newell

Dear Dr John ...



Olive Pits

Cracking olive pits
trying to get one to grow
no luck yet, does
anyone know the secret?
the trick? I've searched
high and low, for a way to
make olive pits grow.

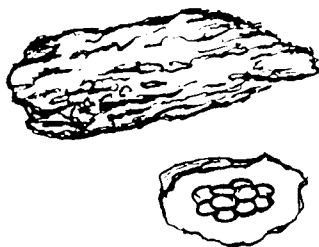
Anne Davenport

BITTER MELON

Momordica charantia

The dull gray days of winter will soon be upon us; it is a time when our homes cry out for the colors of flowers. Bitter melon can help fill this need. It forms a graceful vine that has 3", finely divided, gray-green leaves and will be covered with small, pale yellow flowers in 8-10 weeks from sprouting.

Bitter melons are 8-12" long nubby, pale-green, fruits that are members of the squash family (*Cucurbitaceae*). They are available year round in almost all Oriental markets. They are sold unripened. To harvest the seeds, you will have to ripen the fruits on the window sill. Try to buy fruits that have already started to turn yellow in spots. If there are no signs of yellowing, the fruits may rot before they ripen.



Place the unripened fruit on a sunny window sill. As the fruit matures, it will turn a golden yellow color and split open (almost in the shape of a squash blossom). Within the ripened fruit, there are rows of bright red seeds. The red is actually a thick aril that surrounds the flat, oval, 1/2" seed. The aril is very sweet and considered a great delicacy in Japan ... **but** the seeds

themselves are poisonous. Your editor accidentally swallowed an immature seed. Obviously I lived, but for 24 hours I had hoped to die! Remove the aril by hand! The cleaned seeds can be sown immediately or stored in an air-tight jar for several months.

Sow the seeds in a large hanging basket pot. The vines climb by means of tendrils and are going to grow up and not hang down. We use macrame rope hangers (available in most five and ten stores). These offer more support for the vines than the thin wire hangers that usually are sold with pots. Sow 3-5 seeds, about an inch below the surface in a pot that is filled with moist potting soil. Loosely cover the pot with plastic wrap to insure humidity. The seeds will germinate within a week. When the seedlings are 6-8" tall, put the pot in the macrame hanger and hang in a sunny window.

The first flowers that appear are male. About two weeks later the female flowers begin to open. These are easily recognized by the tiny squashed shaped ovary at the base of the flower.

Now comes the fun. Take a fine paint brush and gently brush the pollen in the male flower and then gently brush the female flower. You are playing bee! Within a few days after pollination the female flower will drop and the small ovary will begin to swell and develop into a tiny bitter melon.

Growing bitter melon is a wonderful project for the classroom or a project for the kids at home. They get to ripen the fruit, harvest the seed, sow it, grow it, pollinate it!



CARDAMOM COOKIES

1 cup (½ pound) sweet butter
1 cup dark brown sugar
1 egg
2¼ cups sifted flour (not all-purpose)
Cardamom seed (ground) to taste - at least 1 teaspoon



Cream the butter and sugar until mixture is light. Add beaten egg and mix; then add the flour and mix. Add cardamom and mix. Taste to see if the dough has the degree of spiciness you prefer. Remember cardamom loses its potency as it ages. (The baking process will not change the intensity of flavor.)

Bake in a preheated 375° oven until a very delicate brown - probably about 6-12 minutes depending on how big and thick you make the cookies. You can refrigerate the dough for several days or freeze it (keeps for months). Cookie dough can be dropped from a spoon - or rolled up, refrigerated and sliced (more even edges on result) or even rolled out and cut with a cookie cutter. However, there is an extremely high fat content and you need to be fast and efficient with a rolling pin to roll this dough.

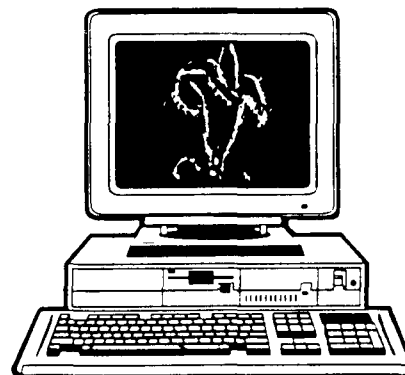
Jim Levin

COMPUTER CARE FOR HOUSE PLANTS

House Plant Clinic is a program that claims to "answer your questions and evaluate more than 150 plant-care secrets only professionals know. You'll find what the problem is and receive recommendations for simple treatment steps to let your plants grow with joy" (Ugh).

House Plant Clinic seems only to be available for the Mac and all of us New York Pits are IBM PC fanatics. Interested Mac owners may order the program from the Tiger Software Catalog; Item # C07-1115. 1-800-888-4437.

Any of our readers who have tried various plant care programs that they would like to recommend - or warn others against - should send their opinions to the: Information Technology Expert, c/o The Pits, 251 West 11th ST. NYC 10014.



"SCRAMBLED PITS" ANSWERS

The main answer is that there is a lot of egg upon our puzzle-setter's face - an unpardonable proofreading error crept into word #9. The correct answers should have been:

(1) FEIJOA - score 24, (2) KUMQUAT - score 32 + 50 for 7 letters = 82, (3) AVOCADO - score 13 + 50 for 7 letters = 63, (4) MANGO - score 16, (5) SAPOTE - score 11, (6) GENIPE - score 12, (7) LITCHI - score 11, (8) MALANGA - score 13 + 50 for 7 letters = 63, (9) SOURSOP - score 9 + 50 for 7 letters = 59, and (10) DURIAN - score 14 giving a maximum score of 355 (I think). Apologies to all ...

House Plant Magazine

(Vols. I and II)

Like many others, I took out a charter subscription to House Plant magazine when first I heard about it, because I was hungry for a new plant periodical. I had been through Plants Alive, House Plants and Porch Gardens, and the Elvin MacDonald venture, watching them rise and fall and merge and fade, so I was ripe.

I don't want yet another primer; I have graduated from Horticultural High and consider myself a serious hobbyist, who wants to know the crafts of floriculture and horticulture so that I can grow plants that turn people green with envy, (not chlorophyll), and I want to know the botany necessary to attain that goal, but I don't feel the need for more than that. I think that puts me in the mainstream, so I presume that what I express as my reactions are not unique to me.

I found the early issues of House Plant magazine too cute, too fluffy, and too basic, and I allowed my subscription to lapse. Here's how it went down with me. Vol 1, No 1 had potting ABC's. It also had a Department called Product Previews, and here are two of the products: a line of self watering pots priced at \$19.95 for the 8" size, and \$83.95 for a 17" one; and something called a "watering" bird that is placed in a plant pot, and beeps then the soil is dry. The bird sells for \$14.95. So I was forced to wonder who was being addressed here.

They have Tovah Martin writing for them, but while her delightful writing skills were in evidence, her topics were soft. I think that my overall criticism was that I wanted information, and the magazine was offering 6 o'clock headlines and I wanted All Things Considered.

Were there good things about the magazine? Yes there were. Each issue has

what they call a centerpiece (they strain to have departments called First Leaf, Clippings, Cuttings, Off-Shoots, Tips, and the like) that gives a little more attention to one plant, and these, while far from comprehensive, are enticing, particularly when a reader is not already on intimate terms with the centerpiece plant. The magazine also has a mini-feature, which can be on a cultural practice (Pinching and Pruning, Spring '93) or, what I really liked, was one on Chimera violets (Fall '92) followed up by one on Propagating Chimeras (Winter '92.)

Debbie asked me to review the Spring '93 issue, and I had hoped she'd leave me out of this particular loop, but you know how ruthless she is. She insisted that the magazine had improved, but I was dubious. Well, I did like the Jasmine article, because I somehow had never grown them, and it featured a profile by Linda Yang (a putative PIT) of George and Virginie Elbert of whom I remain abashedly fond, that I had seen in the NY Times, complete with a turn of the century photo of them. And if you're going to have an article on propagating violets,

you can't go wrong with a piece by Anne Tinari. On the other hand, if I spend \$19.95 for each 8" plant pot, and \$14.95 to have a bird tell me when to water, I'll never get together the money to see the Singapore Botanic Gardens, in which case the 3-page spread was tantalizing, but ultimately unfulfilling.

So yes, the magazine is getting better; it is gradually finding its voice and its readership, but I'm not sure if its being the only magazine around is going to get me to resubscribe, or if I'll use the money to buy plants or a plant book. It is a cliffhanger to myself.

Shifrah Nimchinsky



PIT REVIEWS



the pits