

# the pits

## NEWSLETTER

April-May 1999  
Volumn 21 #3

### WHAT'S IN THE MARKET

Cape gooseberry, Carambola, Carob, Cherimoya, Bitter melon, Feijoa, Ginger, Guava, Husk tomato, Kumquat, Lemon grass, Malanga, Mango, Name, Pepino melon, Papaya, Passion fruit, Prickly pear (pads & fruit), Tamarillo, Taro, and Tomatillo.

### SEEDS

This month Bob is offering seeds of Passion Fruit and Tamarind.

If you are interested, send \$1.00 per packet and a **sturdy** SASE (self-addressed stamped envelop) to Bob Jurgens, 116-32 227th St., Cambria Heights, NY 11411. Checks should be made payable to The Rare Pit and Plant Council.



### Dear Oh Deer or Alas Poor Bambi

In times past, during a country drive, an occasional cry could be heard: "Oh ! look a deer." Today in the burbs the repeated cry is: "There goes a deer pack to check out the Jone's garden."

Deer are stripping food growing areas of the Garden State, forcing farmers to sell out to developers. (or *visa versa*) Dick and Jane move in but Buck, Doe and family are still about, waiting for a tasty treat from a new kitchen garden. What to do?

Like most people, niece Ellen and husband Len of upper Westchester, NY have "tall fenced" in their kitchen/vegetable garden but still need other deer deterrents. Inquisitive Ellen, sniffed out a solid-type deer repellent at a garden center and realized

the aroma of Irish Spring. The cheaper bar soap is cut up, placed in a mesh sack and hung around the fenced area. It repels and lasts through many showers.

At Monticello, Thomas Jefferson built a high brick wall around his gardens not for appearances but primarily to keep out deer.

Did Buck and Doe get stuck in a boxwood thicket and did each attempt to individually nibble their way out, thus creating the popular Manor House maze? (For more information check out Garden Launch Pad On-Line. There are many lists and further witch craft suggestions to deter deer) MJB

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The Rare Pit & Plant Council  
17 Circuit Ave. Scituate, MA 02066

## CAPER BUSH

### *Caper spinosa*

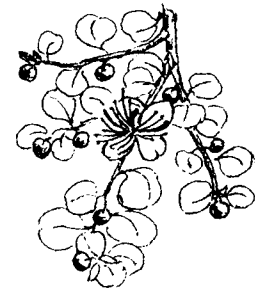
We have an unusual offering this month, young caper plants. Unfortunately we must charge the cost of sending them priority mail. If you are interested send \$4.00, to me: Debbie Peterson, Rare Pit & Plant Council, 17 Circuit Ave, Scituate, MA 02066. Checks should be made payable to The Rare Pit & Plant Council.

Ten years ago, Dr. John and I saw this lovely little wild plant growing in the crevices of rocks on the Greek Islands. The blue-gray leaves were semi-succulent, the flowers small, white with a blush of pink and were borne in profusion. In the wild, the plant had a trailing habit of growth, about 6" high x 15" wide. I had to have it! If it could grow in those rugged conditions, surely it could grow in a loving and caring home. Think again! My success was negligible, but I learned a lot with each passing plant.

Finding a reliable source was difficult. One nursery sold me a member of the mint family and swore it was a caper bush - square stem and all. Other nurseries would have a couple of little plants that were expensive and frail. This year, I found them in a wholesale catalog. I had to buy 32 plants! That number would undoubtedly increase my chances for survival. Our home, however, is not equipped for a mini plantation.

The capers we buy in a store, are the pickled flower buds of the caper bush. They are essential for several Mediterranean cuisines. Veal picanti would not be "picanti" without the caper. They make a spicy topping for smoked salmon and cream cheese. In our house their uses are endless. See member Tony Carella's "Barese Peppers" Page 4

The fruits are also pickled and called caper berries. The latter can be found in gourmet shops at a frightful cost. They are 2" long, ovate and have



a spicy bitter taste. We have yet to find a good recipe for them. (However, they make an interesting substitution for olives in a famous cocktail- should we call it a "gauntlet"?).

I went on-line to check out the caper. As usual with on-line subjects there was more than I could ever use. Here are a few salient facts gleaned from the many articles I found.

Origin: Capers grow wild throughout the Mediterranean, and are cultivated in France, Spain, Italy and Algeria. Their origin, however, is supposed to be the drier areas of Western and Central Asia.

Culture: "Dry heat and intense sunlight make the preferred environment for caper plants. Plants are productive in zone having an annual rainfall of 14" mostly falling in winter and spring. They can easily survive temperatures of 105° and are cold hardy to 18°. (Translated to our zones 8a - 11).

"Where native, plants grow spontaneously in cracks and crevices of rocks and stone walls. Plants grow well in nutrient poor, sharply-drained gravelly soils. Mature plants develop large extensive root systems that penetrate deeply into the earth. Capers are salt-tolerant and flourish along shores within sea-spray zones." (A neighbor of ours grows a caper bush successfully in a small sandy garden literally on the beach. She has to bring it in for winter, which she describes as a holding action at best.)

"Caper plants are small shrubs, and

may reach about one 1' in height. However, uncultivated plants are seen hanging, draped and sprawling as they scramble over soil and rocks. The caper's vegetative canopy covers soil surfaces which helps to conserve soil water. Leaf stipules may be formed into spines. Flowers are born on first-year branches.

Processing: "Capers are preserved either in a vinegar brine or under layers of salt in a jar. Raw capers are bland flavored and need to be cured to develop their piquant flavor. In Italy, capers are graded on a scale from '7' to '16' which indicates their size in millimeters. Mechanized screens are used to sort the various sized capers after being hand-picked from the hillsides." (I have searched high and low for a pickling recipe - if you have one, please send it on)

Propagation: Caper seeds are available so we include the following for the very patient and skilled grower. "Caper seeds are miniscule and are slow to nurture into seedlings. Fresh caper seeds germinate readily - but only in low percentage (???) Dried seeds become dormant and are notably difficult to germinate and therefore require extra measures to grow. Dried seeds should be initially immersed in warm water (105<sup>o</sup>) and then let soak for a day. Seeds should be wrapped in a moist cloth, placed in a sealed glass jar and kept in the refrigerator for 2-3 months. After refrigeration, soak the seeds again in warm water overnight. Plant the seeds about .4" deep in a loose well drained soil media. Young caper plants can be

grown in a greenhouse (preferable minimum temperature of 50<sup>o</sup>)

"Collect stem cuttings in February, March or April. Use stems from the basal portions, greater than .4" and 3 1/2" in length with 6-10 buds. Use a loose well drained media with bottom heat. Dip cuttings in rooting medium.

"Grown from seed, in California caper bushes reportedly begin to flower in the fourth year, however Italian sources report flowering from first year transplants.

"Caper plantings will last 20 to 30 years."

How does all this translate to the homeowner. Pot your plants up in a loose gravelly soil- the type sold for cactus, preferably in a clay pot. If you use plastic, put drainage holes along the sides of the pot and fill the bottom with about 1/3 perlite. Put your plant out for the summer as soon as night-time temperatures are above 50<sup>o</sup> in a warm sunny spot. During the winter months keep it evenly moist and in the sunniest window you can find. If you have success with Pomegranates, Rosemary or Olives, you should be able to grow capers successfully. I know I shall try yet again.

Capers are beautiful little plants and will offer a new dimension to your "pit garden". Try them!!!

Those of our members who live in the dry California valleys, can probably grow them outside year round. Southeastern summers are probably too humid.



#### Sources Seed

**Flowery Branch Seed Company \$4.00**  
**Fragrant Path \$2.00**  
**Hudson J.L. Seedsman (\$1.00)**

#### Plants

**Bluebird Nursery (wholesale only)**  
**Richters**

**Flowery Branch GA**  
**Fort Calhoun NE**  
**La Honda CA**

**Clarkson NE**  
**Goodwood Ont. CA L0C !A0**



### Roasted Peppers, Barese style

Very fresh, preferably Dutch Peppers;

Extra Virgin Olive

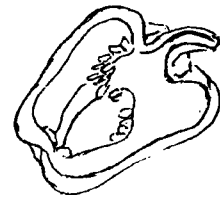
Oil

Garlic

yellow, red & orange, not green.

Parsley - Italian

Capers (Dry salted, from Italian specialty store)



Wash peppers in lukewarm water, pat dry, then roast

them - over wood charcoal is best but an electric broiler is OK, ½" from heating element. Keep turning until 80% of skin is black. Remove skins, discard stem and seeds, save juice. Cut peppers into ¼" strips, put in a bowl with the juice, sliced garlic, capers (brush off excess salt), mix lightly. Barely cover with olive oil. Let stand for 6 hours. Sprinkle with finely chopped Italian parsley before serving. You may vary any of the ingredients, according to taste, but then you forfeit the right to call it "Barese-style"! *Tony Carella*

### BOOK REVIEW

#### Kitchen Garden Planner

Darrell Trout. Meredith Books,  
Des Moines, Iowa. 1999, pp 192.  
\$ 34.95 (USA).

We are always happy to read books written by "Tits" and when we met Darrell Trout at a recent Garden Writers of America symposium he shared a copy of this volume with us. We were unaware of the distinction between a vegetable garden and a kitchen garden since there is considerable overlap. A kitchen garden is designed to please the eye, as well as to provide vegetables, herbs and flowers. 13 garden designs are presented, each with a purpose or theme, such as a basic herb garden or rustic garden or luncheon garden. For each garden the component plants are illustrated with excellent photographs. With each photograph important information is provided eg. Spearmint, perennial, 3' tall, summer growth, color of bloom, zone 3-7, sun requirement, sources of plants and brief description including in this case "invasive".

We think this is an excellent volume for the gardener who wants fresh herbs or vegetables but is tired of straight lines. It is also an excellent volume for the new

gardener who is a bit baffled by garden design.

Several short chapters include ones on soil, tomatoes, greens and edible flowers (we love dropping nasturtium flowers in our guest's salad without comment). A list of 54 sources of mail order plants is worth the price of the book. There is the USDA zone map but more importantly a map of timing of first and last frost. There is also a useful metric conversion chart.

Do we have any reservations? No book of 192 pages can cover everything. The book addresses temperate North America (although the Canadian price is not given, it would be very appropriate to their conditions). To use this book in hotter climates would require considerable substitution. Specific food plants, herb plants and flowers are listed but little mention is made of the numerous varieties and cultivars that may appeal to a particular gardener. There just isn't enough space. This book will be helpful to a gardener putting in a new garden or modifying an existing one. The photographs are outstanding and make it a pleasure to read.

John Hart

## Bay Laurel

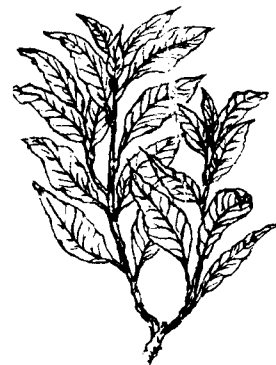
### *Laurus nobilis*

by Stan Schwartz

**Mythology:** In Rome's Borghese Museum is a Bernini marble sculpture illustrating the most romantic of spice legends. Inspired by Ovid's **Metamorphoses**, it is a representation of Daphne being transformed into a laurel tree to escape the advances of Apollo. The mischievous Cupid, angry at Apollo for having called him a "mere boy," exacted revenge by shooting the arrow of desire into the heart of the god of youth and manly beauty. With a second arrow Cupid shot Daphne causing her to flee all love, especially Apollo's. The more he pursued her the more desperate she became. Finally she could run no longer. When Apollo's hand touched hers she prayed to the gods to camouflage her. At once her feet took root, her arms became branches and leaves sprouted from her fingertips. Though Apollo could not marry her now he resolved, nevertheless, to honor her eternally. Poets would write adoringly of her beautiful shining leaves, and festivals would be adorned with her boughs. Her leaves would not drop but would remain evergreen.

**History:** Laurel branches adorned the palaces of the Caesars and the emperors themselves wore wreaths of laurel. It is thought that this custom had multiple reasons. Julius Caesar is said to have worn a crown of laurel to hide his baldness, whereas Tiberius, terrified of lightning, believed the wreath would protect him during a storm. Since laurel was also thought to purify the air, the Emperor Claudius fled Rome during an epidemic and went to Laurentium, a town named for its many laurel trees. For centuries the laurel wreath remained the symbol of a triumphant leader, a celebrated athlete and a distinguished scholar. Thus

came the expression, "To win ones laurels." The laurel was also thought to be endowed with magical qualities. If placed under his pillow the person would see the future in a dream.



Greek physicians esteemed laurel as a promoter of good health. A Greek carrying a laurel branch feared neither poison nor sorcery. Death and evil spirits were driven away by laurel hung on one's door. Because of these associations with physical health and welfare, young doctors were crowned with laurel berries, **Bacca Lairi**, and called baccalaureates or bachelors. In later years girls would burn laurel leaves to win back straying lovers. In one area of Italy the success or failure of crops could be predicted by burning laurel leaves. If they crackled as they burned the crops would be bountiful, but if they burned silently the crops would fail.

**Botany:** The laurel family, **Lauraceae**, includes over 1,000 species of trees and shrubs. Most are native to tropical Southeast Asia. Many are evergreen with simple alternate leaves as with bay laurel. The small flowers are bisexual and greenish-white or yellow. One-seeded fruits are small and fleshy. *Laurus nobilis* is thought to be native to Asia-minor or Southeast Asia but it has been naturalized in the Mediterranean for at least 4,000 years. There it grows wild as far north as the lower Alps in Haute Provence where it may reach a height of 60'. It is hardy to 10<sup>0</sup> Fahrenheit and can endure even colder temperatures for short periods of time. In the United States it grows well in areas that rarely fall below 20<sup>0</sup> Fahrenheit and may reach 40 feet in height.

**Cultivation:** In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century bay

laurel was introduced into Northern Europe where it decorated Castles and large estates. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century nurseries in Belgium specialized in propagating these plants in pots creating spiral trunks and pyramid or globe-shaped tops. The trees are relatively slow growing as container plants but may eventually reach 20 feet in height. They are more easily grown from cuttings than seeds, though it may take six months or more for a cutting to root. Laurel responds well to pruning and doing so results in a bushy shrubby specimen. Soil must be well drained, as wet soggy roots will bring about early death. Moderate fertilizing is recommended in spring and heavier fertilizing is suggested for summer.

**Cooking:** To harvest leaves, merely pick them and use them as the recipe indicates. To preserve them, place leaves loosely in a lightly covered basket until they dry. Leaves dried in open light tend to be washed out in color though not in flavor. If flat leaves are desired, a board or other weight should be used to hold them in place while drying. Otherwise they will curl. In cooking, it is important to be sure you are using *Lauris nobilis* and not the California native, *Umbellularia californica*. These trees grow primarily in the coastal mountains of California and Oregon and may reach 75 feet in height and cover a circle 100 feet in diameter. Though their leaves resemble bay

laurel in shape they differ in color and flavor. Sweet bay leaves are glossy dark green and pleasingly aromatic, while the intensely pungent leaves of the California laurel are a dull sage color and when used in cooking can deliver a resinous oily flavor. Under no circumstances should bay laurel be confused with cherry laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*, the leaves of which are poisonous.

In cooking the maxim "Less is more" is certainly true of bay laurel. It can easily overpower other flavors if given half a chance. Most often it is used in soups, stews, sauces and marinades. It is recommended that for each quart of food one third of a fresh leaf, one sixth of a dried leaf or one pinch of ground bay be used. Since the dry leaf is sharp-edged and does not soften appreciably during cooking, it is safest to remove it before serving the food it has flavored. Because it may be difficult to find in a dish filled with meats and/or vegetables, bay is often tied into a small flavoring bundle called a **bouquet garnis**. Thus combined with such herbs as parsley, thyme, chervil, marjoram and celery leaves, it can easily be removed when the cooking process is over. According to the **Larousse Gastronomique**, the berries of the bay tree are used in the distillation of the spirit of aromatic herbs called **Fioravanti**.

## **TAMARIND**

(*Tamarindus indica*)

Few 'Pits'

can equal the tamarind for beauty, ease of culture, general availability and charm. In

nature, the tamarind

is a mighty tree, soaring to 80 - 100'. Have no fear, unlike the avocado, the tamarind can



easily be restrained in a pot and make excellent subjects for bonsai. The feathery, mimosa-like foliage gives the plant an airy graceful appearance and like many members of the pea family, its foliage closes up at night.

When I talk on 'Pits', I always begin with the pineapple. Snapping off its head makes a dramatic beginning and peeling off the leaves to reveal the roots demonstrates the ease of culture. You can't fail with a

pineapple! I conclude with the tamarind. It also offers sure fire success. Tamarind seeds are readily available in my part of the country and I can give at least one seed to every member of the audience.

The name *Tamarindus indica*, is misleading. Tamarind is native to tropical Africa and probably traveled to India along the ancient spice route. "The fruit was well known to Egyptians and to the Greeks in the fourth century BC"<sup>1</sup> The tree has become naturalized throughout India, the East Indies, tropical America, West Indies, and the Bahamas. Tamarind is one of the essential ingredients of curry and the fresh pulp makes a delicious tea.

Tamarind is an evergreen tree, but it will shed its leaves in time of drought. If you forget to water it - don't fear. Unlike other tropical trees, it will revive and grow new leaves. The pea-like flowers are yellow, orange and blushed with red. They are borne in small racemes. Don't hold your breath, we've never known one to bloom.

The flowers are followed by brittle brown pods that resemble a plump lima bean. The flesh is a sticky sub-acid golden-brown pulp and buried within the pulp are dark brown, 1/4" round seeds. Trees, when grown in nature, will begin to bear in their fourth year and continue to produce heavy crops for 60-80 years.

Tamarind pods are frequently sold in Ethnic markets in the spring. Tamarind pulp is sold year round in



gourmet shops and ethnic markets. The paste is sold in chunks wrapped in plastic. Within the paste there will be 15-40 seeds. (The cheaper the package, the more seeds.) To free the seeds, soak the paste in lukewarm water for several hours. The seeds will separate easily. Tamarind seeds retain their viability for several years. Elizabeth Schneider (author of Uncommon Fruits and Vegetables) told us, she germinated the seeds of a pod she'd stored in the freezer for years. We don't recommend this. Best to dry the seeds and store in an airtight jar or sow immediately.

The seeds must be nicked and soaked for several hours before they can be sown. Scrape a tiny portion of the outer shell with a nail file or sandpaper - just enough to see a 1/8" section of the dull under coat. Soak the seed in a glass of warm water for about one hour or until the outer coat begins to shrivel. Sow the seeds 1 and 1/2 times their width in a small flat, jiffy pellet or any container filled with moist, sterile potting medium. The seeds germinate in about 10-14 days.

The seedlings are adorable. The rise on a stiff stalk with their seed case intact. There will be a feathery crown a round the case - these are the first true leaves. Don't pull off the seed case!

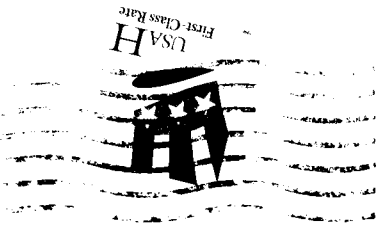
When the seedlings have 2 sets of true leaves they can be transplanted to individual pots. As the little trees grow, keep pinching the tips of the branches to encourage a bushy plant.

Tamarind is a beautiful plant that is easy to germinate and to grow. It is a must for any 'Pit' collection.

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<sup>1</sup>Fruits of Warm Climates, Julia Morton 1987

Christopher Carrus  
9500 Rainer Ave S. #212  
Seattle  
WA 98118



Rare Pit & Plant Council  
17 Circuit Avenue  
Scituate, MA 02066

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