

the pits

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2001
Volume 21 #8

WHAT IS IN THE MARKET

Arrowroot, Bitter Melon, Carambola, Carob, Cherimoya, Date, Feijoa, Ginger, Kumquat, Lemon grass, Macadamia, Mango, Papaya, Passion fruit, Pepino melon, Persimmon, Pomegranate, Prickly pear (pads & fruit), and Tamarillo.

SEEDS

This month Bob is offering seeds of Annato, Passion Flower, a mixture of garden vegetables, broccoli, alfalfa, courtesy of Woody Brundage. If you are interested send \$1.00 per packet to Bob Jurgens, 116-32 227th St., Cambria Heights, NY 11411. Please send a sturdy envelope. Checks should be made payable to the Rare Pit & Plant Council



FOLLOW UP ON THE WHITE LIST

In our last issue, Dr. John asked our members to write to the Department of Agriculture regarding the White List, protesting legislation that would limit the importation of plants and seeds to all but the largest plant and seed importers. He received the following letter from Richard Rominger, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. Space is too limited to quote it in full, but here are some of the issues:

.....“Unfortunately, some misinformation has been circulated regarding the purpose and goals of the National Invasive Species Council, which was set up under Executive Order (E.O.) 13112.64 Fed. Reg. 6,183 (1999). The Executive Order is directed only at invasive species. Invasive species are non-native species that cause or are likely to cause economic harm, harm to the environment or human health E.). 13112 1 (f).

In addition, as member of the National Council and co-chair, the Secretary is committed to work with interested parties on developing a comprehensive management plan that address invasive species problems. Progress made by the National Invasive Species Council in meeting the requirements of the Executive Order can be seen and commented on, by visiting the Council’s website at [Http://www.invasivespecies.gov](http://www.invasivespecies.gov). The current draft of the Invasive Species Management Plan is posted at this website for public review.”

We sent a copy of this letter and Dr. John’s letter to J.L. Hudson, Seedsman. He thanked us but stated that the fight is far from over.

We visited the Website, and while much of it is confusing it is refreshingly free of legalese. We encourage you to take a look.

The Rare Pit & Plant Council

17 Circuit Ave. Scituate, MA 02066

SEEDS

This month, we asked subscribers, that we know grow many plants from seed to review their favorite catalogs. Bob Jurgens sent us the following on J. L. Hudson

The 2001 Ethnobotanical Catalog of Seeds Catalog No. 62

Price \$1.00 (Some of us refer to this as Hudson's)

This is a catalog of over 90 pages of some 500 genera of seeds, books and information. Most of the seed offered can not easily be found in other sources. Most seeds are a \$1.50 per packet. There are family names, common names, growing and germination tips, as well as, a pronunciation

CATALOG REVIEW

In our last issue we reviewed an excellent cook book, The Herbfarm Cookbook. It is an outstanding cookbook, especially if you live in a warm climate and have a year round herb garden. Supermarkets where we live are beginning to carry fresh herbs but this is by no means universal.

When we lived in New York City we had access to a wonderful herb and spice store, Aphrodisia, but we have found nothing like it in Boston. And so it was with a sense of East Coast superiority that we reluctantly ordered spices from of all places Wisconsin. Penzeys has a 48 page color catalogue which includes Annato, Carom or Anjawan, Fenugreek, Nigella and two kinds of Mustard seed. All of which, Deb has already planted and most have sprouted.

They carry pre-mixed curry powders and garam marsala. However they also carry all the ingredients to make your own curry as any proper Indian housewife does. Pre-mixed curries cannot compare to those you make yourself. They offer regional seasoning mixes, chilies, marinades and 6

guide.

They also offer seeds of vegetables, herbs, ornamentals and medicinal plants from their Zapotec Collection. These seeds are collected for 4,000 - 8,000 elevation in the Sierra Madre del Sur in Southern Oaxaca, Mexico.

A \$5.00 order will also get you next years catalog and a \$10.00 order also gets you a supplement (This supplement often contains some interesting things that are in limited supply.)

The address is:

J. L. Hudson, Seedsman
Star Route 2, Box 337
La Honda, CA 94020

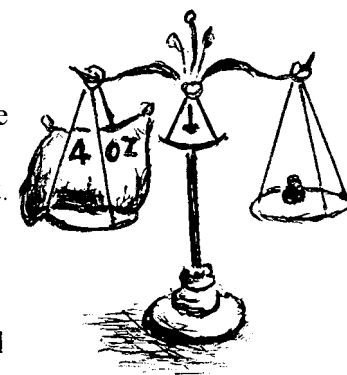
Bob Jurgens

concentrated soup bases. One of their gift packs makes a lovely wedding or hostess gift.

The catalog lists a much larger and more varied array than at your local supermarket but it doesn't tell you of the freshness which was impressive. The prices are far lower than the 2 ounce jars you get at the market. One problem was volume. I erroneously ordered 4 ounces of tarragon, which is quite light. 4 ounces filled two mayonnaise jars, more than I am likely to consume in my life time; you may want to share some of the items with a neighbor.

We don't see how you can miss if you cook with spices. The stuff is high quality, fresh and inexpensive. You can order at an 800 number, by FAX or on the Web. For a catalogue call 1 800 741 7787.

So much for our East Coast superiority complex.



John Hart

SEEDS, SEEDS & MORE SEEDS

In keeping with the catalog and seed orientation of this newsletter, Dr. John and I have been having a blast with the Pensey Catalog. Dr. J. is cooking up a storm and I am growing up a storm. Here are the seeds that we have sprouting in our light unit: Ajawian/Carom, *Trachysperum ammi*, Anise, *Pimpinella anisum*, Cumin, *Cuminum cyminum*, Fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*, Fenugreek, *Trigonella foenum-graecum*, Nigella, *Nigella sativa* and Annato, *Bixa orellana*.

WHAT THEY ARE, AND HOW TO GROW THEM

Ajawian, Anise, Cumin and Fennel are all annual members of the Umbelliferae (Queen Anne's Lace family) and a breeze to grow. The seeds germinate within a week. So if you are planning to grow them for the garden you can start the seeds indoor 6 weeks before the last frost, or sow directly into the ground when the soil reaches a temperature of 60°. Sow the seeds in community flats, jiffy pellets or individual 2-3" pots. The seeds should be sown to a depth of 2 ½ times the size of the seed.

We start the seeds with gentle bottom heat. In our house, I use an empty shelf in the kitchen that is over a fluorescent light. The flats or containers are loosely covered with plastic wrap. Once the seedlings have sprouted, move them to a very sunny window or within 3" of a fluorescent light. Slowly remove the plastic. We lift a corner or punch a hole in the cover.

When the seedlings have two sets of



their true leaves it is time to transplant them to a 3-4" individual pot. Give them as much light as you can and keep them evenly moist at all times.

If you don't have a garden, all of these plants can be attractive houseplants, albeit short-lived. They have ferny foliage that can be snipped and added to salads and all have flat 2" heads of creamy white or green flowers. Yes they will set seed in the house.

Annato

As a child, I remember squishing bags of a fatty substance called 'Oleo Margarine'. It was white, lard-like and came with a small packet of orange dye.

As children, our job was to squish the dye around until the lard-like blob turned butter yellow. That dye was Annato that is made from an oily substance that surrounds the seeds of a large shrub, *Bixa orellana*. Today the seeds are used as a saffron substitute in South American cooking.

Years ago we found bright orange burr-like fruits in Balducci's grocery store in New York. The sign read, Dye - Do Not Eat. Naturally we bought them and found dozens of 1/4" triangular seeds within. They all sprouted, but so have all our seeds from Penzeys.

The blossoms of Annato are said to make a superior honey. In South America the dye is said to be a good insect repellent, if you don't mind being a vivid shade of orange.

Bixa is said to bloom and fruit at an early age. It is a glorious shrub and well worth a try in the home. Please let us know of your experiences.



Fenugreek

In ancient times, Tunisian brides were fed a daily diet of fenugreek to fatten them up for their wedding. How wonderful if fat were still a cherished attribute. Today fenugreek is an essential ingredient in Indian curries and Middle Eastern cooking.



Fenugreek, a native to India and the Middle East is a low trailing plant in the bean family. The delicate, tri-foliolate leaves close up at night and open by day. Two months after sowing, small white pea-like flowers bloom. These are followed by narrow, green beans that curve up at the tip and resemble elves slippers. Few Pits can give you foliage, flowers and seeds as quickly or easily as fenugreek.

The newly emerging foliage is considered a delicacy in India. The seeds have a musty pungent quality and are

delicious additions to soups, salad dressings, stews and gravies.

Nigella

The spicy seeds of *Nigella sativa* were an important seasoning before the introduction of Pepper (*Piper nigrum*). The seeds have a spicy, fruity taste and are still used today in Turkish, Greek and Indian cooking.



Nigella sativa should not be confused with its close relative, *Nigella damascena*, i Love in-a-Mist, a popular ornamental annual that is available in most nurseries and seed catalogs. The flowers of Love-in-a-Mist are a soft blue whereas the herb *Nigella* has white and green flowers. We think the herb is just as lovely as the ornamental.

NOTES IN PASSING

At this time of year florists and supermarkets are selling beautiful bunches of tulips that give us hope that spring truly is just around the corner. As soon as you get the tulips home and arranged in a vase, their heads flop to one side giving them a desolate look. The following tip is from Father Bradley at the Foyer of Charity in North Scituate Massachusetts. Put a copper penny in the bottom of your vase and the tulips will remain upright.

A personal note: Our town of Scituate has been all over the national news as the epicenter of the most recent devastating Noreaster. Dr. John and I live on a low cliff, 9' above the sea and 30' back.

The waves did roll across our front lawn just as if the cliff were not there. The winds were incredible and our house shook with each gust. The front yard is a mess, and for a couple of days our road to the mainland was impassable an hour on either side of the high tide. However, we are just fine.

From a friend: A gardening friend of ours who is a dental hygienist passed along the following pearls. People who floss daily live 6 ½ years longer than those who don't. Did you know that one hour of gardening can burn off 650 calories a day. (Never guess it from your editor) and that you also are doing aerobics, weight bearing exercises and stretching. Get out there and dig!

BOOK REVIEW

Having lived on the west coast two years and traveled up and down from California to Washington we came to value the Sunset Western Garden Book as the best source available. It is encyclopedic, well illustrated, easy to read and by far the best around for the West Coast. Its limitations are two. It is a little light on propagation and it departed from the familiar USDA zones setting up its own system. This was necessary because of the substantial maritime influence of the Pacific Ocean. Northern cities such as Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington are over 100 miles from the Ocean and yet their USDA zone is 8. The moderate maritime air is trapped by the Coastal Range and extends the maritime influence to the Western slope of the mountains. Such is not true of the East Coast where there are no mountain ranges to trap the moderating influence of the Atlantic Ocean.

We were pleased when we recently acquired the new Sunset Northeastern Garden Book, Sunset Books, Menlow Park,

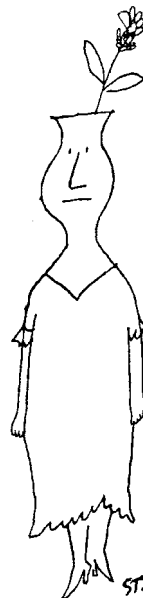
CA, \$ 29.95. It has all the virtues of the west coast edition but one fatal flaw. They have abandoned the USDA hardiness zones and tried to incorporate an integrated zone system similar to that on the West Coast. In our opinion this does not work. For example they place just east of Worcester, Mass USDA zone 5 in the same zone as Cape Cod and the Islands which are zone 7 by the USDA system. Harrisburg, PA. Is placed in the same zone as Eastern Long Island. Can you imagine growing the southern magnolia which will thrive in zone 7 but couldn't be grown in zone 5. Acer Saccharum (Sugar Maple) does not do well in the warmth of zone 7 but thrives on cold winters of zone 5.

We do not know if this flawed zone system is a problem in other areas of the Northeast but our first hand, "dirt under the finger nails", experience tells us that abandoning the USDA cold hardiness zones is a step backward and severely limits the usefulness of an otherwise excellent garden book.

John Hart

SCRAMBLED PITS by Chris Carrdus

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The names of four less-common pits have been jumbled up. Un-jumble them and write the names in the boxes below. Then, re-arrange the letters from the shaded squares only to answer the question:

"What did the pit-growing hobby do to Marcia?"

Answer here:

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EUREKA !

It being mid winter and a bit dreary we find ourselves looking around the market and wishing for a novel vegetable. Something we've never heard of to break the monotony of brussels sprouts, zucchini and squash. Well we didn't find one but we found a new pit and a new spice at the same time. Ajwain or Ajowan seed is also called Carom and we had never tried it. It is a traditional spice of India or Pakistan and has a flavor and aroma reminiscent of curry with a lemony overtone. It is spicy but not hot and absolutely delicious. The seeds are faintly aromatic but when crushed impart a unique flavor to food.

Here are two recipes using Carom. The first is taken from Julie Sahni's Indian Cooking Classic (an outstanding cookbook which will introduce you to one of the world's great cuisines). The second is home made.

Panfried Fillet of Sole laced with Carom.

For two.

Marinate 4 skinless, boned lemon sole fillets in 2 tbsp lemon, 1 tbsp minced garlic, 1 tsp kosher or sea salt and ½ tsp crushed carom seeds for 24-48 hrs. Prepare 3 bowls, one with flour, one with two beaten eggs and one with 2 cup bread crumbs mixed with ½ tsp salt and fresh ground pepper. Dip

fillets in flour then egg and finally in bread crumbs. Heat a frying pan with peanut or vegetable oil ¾ in deep and when hot slip two fillets in. Cook no more than 3 minutes and turn carefully. Cook remaining fillets and serve immediately. nb I think one could use much less oil and simply saute the fillets



Asparagus Soup with Carom (Deb Peterson)

1 cup of left over ends of asparagus
1 small onion chopped
Enough chicken stock to cover the vegetables.
½ tsp carom seed that has been ground in a mortar and pestle.
½ cup light cream.
Saute the onion until it is wilted but not brown. Add the asparagus and chicken stock to cover.
Simmer until the asparagus is tender.
Process in a food processor and return to heat. Add the carom and cream. Simmer to blend flavors, but do not boil.
Carom would probably be a tasty addition to any of the creamed vegetable soups.
Try it. Dr. John

MORE SEED NOTES IN PASSING

Our seed exchange: Bob Jurgens tests every crop of seed we offer before we offer it, like Burpees motto: "Our Seeds Grow"

A brief word when growing from seed, especially if you are new to the game. Avoid packets that say "germination uneven", it frequently translates to "very difficult" or most likely, "not at all".

Hudson's catalog warns you of the problems, other catalogs do not. The following instructions are from a packet of *Eryngium alpinum* seeds I sent away for: "Sow at 70° F and keep moist for 2-4 weeks. Thereafter, drop the temperature 38-45° F for a further 2-4 weeks. Usually best by placing outdoors in a cold frame. Erratic germination 7-60 days. Zone 3-8"

A CROP FOR SUMMER

BITTER MELON

Momordica charantia

Here is an easy crop for the summer garden, or a hanging basket for the patio or a sunny summer window.

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. 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, or plant outside in the garden.

If you grow the plant inside, you will have to pollinate by hand with a fine brush.



A JUST REMINDER TO "PIT" SUBSCRIBERS

Our news letter is issued NOT daily, weekly, or monthly, BUT **ERRATICALLY**, released over a period of time. Regardless of issue time, the price remains **\$12.50** for 8 issues. Originally we tried to make sure everyone received the ten issues they subscribed for, but it has been impossible to keep track of who has received, what and when. Many of you have religiously subscribed on a yearly basis, others are in a quandary. SO if you have not renewed within the year, feel free to do so now: Use the form below, make your check out to the Rare Pit & Plant Council and mail it to: Marty Biesc, 303 E. 37th St. NYC, NY 10016

Name _____

Address _____

Phone & fax (optional) _____

Are you on-line? (Y/N) _____ E-Mail _____

AND THANK YOU for staying with us. Debbie Peterson & Marty Biesc