

Notes for a New Year

If you do not have a pad, tablet or corner of your computer reserved for ideas about your garden plans, this is a good week to start such a helpful habit. If it is portable, keep it with your favorite tool, otherwise it may get packed away with the ornaments.

With the onset of another year we are being harassed about resolutions. Ignore all such suggestions: resolutions are made to be broken and result in more guilt, gardener's guilt, one of the worst species, sure to paralyze a good-enough gardener into a season of default.

As you gather information for your 'what to plant' list and if your property is already graced by the native hemlocks, you will be pleased to know that there is a replacement for this dying breed.

A friend lent me her copy of Bill Bryson's "A Walk in the Woods" in which he notices ailing hemlocks during his trek along the Appalachian Trail. Hemlocks have an unmistakable presence, dark and brooding. If you read "Cold Mountain" those references to hemlocks in the opening chapters warned you that you were reading your way toward tragedy.

This almost black native conifer, *Tsuga Canadensis*, was characteristic of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains and has been beloved throughout the Eastern United States. There are hemlocks native to the western states, the Western and Mountain hemlocks, *T. heterophylla* and *T. mertensiana*, that are not being affected but they require summers that are both cool and wet, an impossibility in Virginia!

The pest responsible for the decline of the eastern hemlock population is a moth imported accidentally decades ago called the balsam woolly adelgid that along with mites and scale has become so common. It would be too expensive and too uncertain to attempt any real efforts toward elimination of the pest, although individual trees can be treated and their lives prolonged.

Fortunately the Chinese hemlock, *Tsuga chinensis*, seems immune to woolly adelgid and prospers in zones 5 – 9. It can be found at Forest Farm.

Cabbages & Kings

In the cookie department nothing surpasses gingerbread men. I was fortunate to have been in the first grade before the advent of those supremely boring characters, Dick and Jane and Baby Sally. A beloved first-grader, excited about having a real book after red, blue, and yellow paperbacks, was direly disappointed to be given a hardback that was just more of the same.

On the contrary, my first grade reader had stories of cranky grandmas who turned into redheaded woodpeckers, trolls who lurked under bridges and a gingerbread boy who leapt off the cookie sheet and ran away, a boy obviously full of ginger, that spice of renown. The use of ginger dates back 3000 years although it wasn't widely used until Marco Polo rediscovered it. Legend has it that Queen Elizabeth I rolled out gingerbread men that resembled her courtiers?

If you are grating the fresh rhizome into a recipe, go lightly. The root is more pungent than the powder shaken from those little cans. Science now confirms the folk belief that the ingredients in ginger do have medicinal qualities. These natural properties help manage motion sickness and the nausea of pregnancy. Ginger may also be used as an anti-inflammatory by arthritics.

If you buy the root, wrap it and keep it in the refrigerator for a week. It can be frozen for up to three months. The roots with the more surface irregularities that show where other roots branched off will be sharper than a smoother piece. Now you can eat without guilt the container of crystallized ginger you got for the cookies you never made. It is good for you!