

## **Plant Your Little Tree!**

Several Christmases ago I was given a small fir tree in a pot, lighted and decorated for the season and when I planted it I knocked off the tired container soil and planted it in what passes for loam in my garden. If I remember correctly, it was too chilly to baby the baby and it is doing just fine.

Any time I see a balled and burlapped tree being shoved into a hole I am acutely uncomfortable. In the first place, tree roots should never be left in a ball: their natural pattern is out from the base, wide not deep. Secondly, all that cordage and burlap is not going away any time soon. Not only should the tree roots be spread out but the hole itself should be dug wide but no deeper than is needed to accommodate the root mass. Nor should the soil from the planting hole be so enriched that those roots never want to venture away from that cozy environment.

Be careful not to pile soil around the trunk: it is not a flagpole trying to topple. If you are concerned about it tipping, place three stakes at a distance and attach guy wires. Put the wires through pieces of old hose to protect the bark and attach loosely to give the tree some 'play'. A degree of movement strengthens the root development I have been told. Remove this harness in late spring.

Mulch as well should be kept away from the tree trunk to avoid creating a campsite for mice. In spreading it near the tree, don't overdo it. If either soil or mulch is applied too heavily near the trunk the roots may be encouraged to gird the tree.

## **Another Kind of Tree**

Popular as gifts are the plants grown to look like little trees. Rosemary trained to resemble a miniature Christmas tree makes a fine gift for a fine cook. It might eventually be happier outside in the ground but it can be maintained inside for months by taking care. Lavender is lovely used in the same way and both of these plants require bright light. Because they are so densely grown they need light to keep their inner areas healthy. Turn them regularly to prevent the foliage rotting from lack of light.

Outdoors these Mediterranean plants are drought survivors but potted up they may need water every third day. Ivies used to construct a topiary wreath need the same sort of extra care. A dilute feeding of fertilizer applied bimonthly will help maintain these seasonal glories in pristine condition. All of this instruction may explain the popularity of sweetly scented foliage Pelargoniums, our tender geraniums. They are fool proof! Not only neatly green and forgiving of neglect, but their flowers will lift your winter-sagging spirits.

## **The Old is New**

Back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century when people took Sunday drives, actually ushered the family into the car and drove slowly along country roads, a field of hazy

blue buckwheat was one of the prettiest sights to see. Today it is grown as a cover crop because it mellows the soil and it is rich in potassium, the element represented by the third number in the 10-10-10, N-P-K on the fertilizer bag.

It is also valuable for those with an allergy to wheat gluten. Despite its name, buckwheat is not related to wheat, nor is it a grain. Strangely, it is related botanically to rhubarb...? However, although it may not be a grain, it acts like one nutritionally. It has a high level of an antioxidant called rutin that improves blood circulation and may possibly keep LDL cholesterol from blocking blood vessels.

If you are wondering why you do not see 'buckwheat' on your cereal box, it is because the part of the plant we eat is the seed, ground into flour or hulled for groats. This goes by the name kasha usually. We oatmeal-for-breakfast devotees are surprised that half a cup of dry buckwheat groats contains 8.4 grams of dietary fiber, twice what we have in our oatmeal. If it becomes fashionable it may become expensive, do you think? Will it appear as a basic commodity or will it have seven sorts of sugar added, making that trip down the cereal aisle even more frustrating than it already is. I realize it is a marketing ploy designed to match the TV ads aimed at children, but do you suppose someday there might be an 'adults only' cereal section? Bah humbug!