

The Fragrant News

March 2007

Welcome to the Fragrant News.

If this is the first time you are receiving a newsletter a special welcome! Lots of people seem to have been busy on the Internet over the summer break as there has been a huge increase in newsletter subscribers. Thanks for joining this garden circle. We aim to give readers practical information that will help in planning and using the home garden. Much of the newsletter is herbally- based, as herbs are our passion.

WHERE DOES THAT HERB COME FROM? HERBS WITH INTERNATIONAL FLAVOUR

BASIL – *Ocimum basilicum*

“Every good Hindu goes to his rest with a Basil leaf on his breast. This is his passport to paradise” – M Grieve

Basil is often thought of as originating in Italy. True, the Romans were responsible for spreading it throughout the parts of Europe they conquered and consumed in the mighty Roman Empire. And it is natural to consider it Italian, as the herb is THE integral ingredient of pesto but no, basil does not come from Italy. The most popular theory of how it travelled from its homeland of India is it coming as a trade item on the ancient trade routes – the silk route from China. It is recorded as being a culinary herb by 2nd C in Europe. There is confusion as to whether basil is an annual or a perennial plant. In tropical climates yes, it is perennial. It thrives in steady, all year round warmth and when we try to grow it in the southern climes the sharp drop in night time temperatures and the chilly southerly winds are just not to its liking. So, it curls up and dies. Hence in our climate it grows as an annual. We are just too cold for its sun-loving instincts. If you are lucky enough to live in Queensland, Australia or the northern tip of New Zealand then it will be possible to partake of the wonderful flavour for most of the year. In the twenty years we have had heated tunnel house space, just three of those years we have succeeded in growing basil right through the winter. Even then, it has been spindly and sickly. Apparently there was a commercial venture to grow basil year round for pesto manufacture. The whole operation had to move to the Pacific Islands, as the amount that grew in the colder, darker winter months was not enough to give a consistent yield for production requirements. Unfortunately, basil is one of the few herbs that lose its flavour when dried. So we can only enjoy it fresh for about four or five months of the year. By harvesting the leaves and freezing them either whole or in oil then the pungency of that great flavour can still be enjoyed for the rest of the time.



PESTO

- 1-cup basil leaves (or parsley or coriander)
- 1 clove garlic
- 1/3-cup oil
- 2 tbsp pine nuts (or sunflower seeds)
- 3 tbsp grated Parmesan cheese

Whiz first three ingredients. Add last three and whiz to combine.

LETTUCE – *Lactuca serriola*

‘ Galen adviseth old men to use it with spice; and where spices are wanting, to add mints, rochet, and such like hot herbs.’ – Nicholas Culpepper

Lettuce is an everyday ingredient over summer. It is used in salads and sandwiches practically all year round. Once upon a time it used to be only the hearting lettuce that was grown in the



summer vegetable garden. This type is similar to a cabbage as it forms a large, hard ball or heart, at the centre. As it matures and thickens it becomes bitter and strong in flavour. Come the colder months and the first frost turns it to mush. Now there is an endless selection of lettuce varieties available. Lettuces that comes in all shapes and colours. Oak leaf, crinkly, variegated, red leaf, buttercrunch, smooth leaf, serrated leaf. All these types are open in the centre and less prone to bolt and go to seed in hot, dry weather. Cutting out the fleshy leaf and leaving the

root in ground there is a bonus as small, new lettuces will appear on the severed stalk. Also, they can be grown year round. In the depths of winter these types of lettuce can be frozen solid in the morning and on the table in a bowl for the evening meal. But what have we done over the centuries to achieve this? Genetic engineering might be a modern catch-phrase but gardeners have been modifying and adapting plants for a long time, hundreds of years in fact. All these modern lettuces owe their heritage to wild lettuces. These were once used by herbalists for upset digestive systems and taken as a cure. The wild lettuce can still be found today, mainly in weedy, waste areas. It is a tall, spindly plant and is similar to sow thistles. It tastes very bitter unlike the modern sweet and juicy lettuces we now can enjoy.

HUMMUS

2 cups cooked chick peas	1 tbsp mint
1 1/2 cups chick pea cooking water	1 clove garlic
1/3 cup tahini paste	2 tsp soy sauce
2 tbsp lemon juice	½ tsp paprika
1 tbsp parsley	

Best made when chick peas are still hot. Put all into whiz and mix for several minutes. Leave chilling for several hours minimum to allow flavours to blend. The best, non –dairy, low fat spread out! Hummus makes a great salad dressing or as a dip on crackers with a slice of tomato. Tahini paste is getting harder to source. It is easy to make – whizz sesame seeds and oil to make a thick paste. This keeps well in a lidded jar in the fridge.

TOMATOES – *Lycopersicum sp.*

‘ Tomatoes were probably brought to Europe soon after the conquest of Mexico by Cortes in 1532.’ – Roger Phillips & Martyn Rix



Tomatoes are another vegetable – or ancient herb- that we have adapted to suit our gardens and palates. There is much choice for the gardener to select the variety that appeals for the summer garden. One that we have tried this year is “mortgage lifter”. So called because the grower who developed it was able to pay off his debt with the abundant and large fruited crop. It is a beefsteak so will be fleshy and large and hopefully tasty when it matures. Another new selection this year that we are trying is “red

currant". It has already fruited and the small, red fruit are a cherry or cocktail type with clusters of eight or more tomatoes. They are quite flavoursome and give a small taste of tomato. We enjoy them on crackers and as a snack. But, are they a genetic throw back? Think of the lettuce and how it has evolved from the spindly, small leafed plant to the very succulent, large lettuce of modern times. Are these tiny tomatoes just a reversion to what the original tomato may have been?

ALPINE STRAWBERRY – *Fragaria* sp. “Doubtless God Almighty could have made a better berry, but he never did.” Izzak Walton – c. 1700s

Alpine strawberries are another fruit that has evolved with experimentation by the horticulturalist. Monsieur Duchesn, a Frenchman, devoted his life to the scientific study of the approximately one hundred known varieties of alpine strawberries. Alpine strawberries were well regarded and enjoyed but they were always small in size. Look at any Renaissance still life painting and there will be the table laden with fruit, vegetables, flowers and dead partridges and there will be a bowl of succulent sweet alpine strawberries. For hundreds of years gardeners, and cooks no doubt, tried to cross breed the different types and develop a new bigger fruit. In the 19thC it was M. Duchesn’s dedication to the task that finally came up with the right match. By crossing the *Fragaria virginiana* and the *Fragaria chiloensis* types the modern strawberry that we all know and enjoy was successfully born. Some botanist must have been really impressed. The wild strawberry –the one with yellow flowers and red, inedible fruit was named in honour of the success *Duchensia indica*. So, it actually mimics the real thing but is not a strawberry at all. At least one horticulturalist has a memorial as a tribute to his endeavours! (Ian just loves the quote! Being a trout fisher, Izaak Walton wrote one of his favourite books)

HEDGING

Even though we are having magnificently hot days at this time of year the nights are tending to be cool with the hint of autumn. Time to be thinking of that hedge and what choices can be made. It is time to be preparing the ground for planting within the next month or six weeks. Many people decide that a natural, evergreen and live row of trees is the best choice to separate the neighbours and enhance privacy. A row of greenery forms a natural barrier that can be clipped twice a year and unlike a fence, does not need painting to keep it looking great. Pittosporums are probably the first choice for an external or boundary hedge. These New Zealand native shrubs are indigenous which makes them reasonably, winter wet tolerant and dry summer hardy. There are many choices to be made from the wide range of Pittosporums. *Pittosporum eugenioides* are a group that are quick growing and vigorous. They are better suited for lifestyle or farm situations where they can grow to over three metres and provide a block against prevailing winds. *Pittosporum crassifolium* is the seaside choice as the thick, leathery leaf can tolerate summer drought and salt laden winds. *Pittosporum tenuifolium* and the wide range of cultivars are better suited for town size sections and will quickly grow to provide a privacy screen from traffic and neighbours. All Pittosporums can be readily clipped and shaped to form formal, neat hedgerows. *Corokias*, *Ake-Ake*, *Pseudopanax*, *Coprosma* and *Lophomyrtus* are other NZ natives that can be used for hedging. They are all vigorous and wind hardy. *Photinia* ‘Red Robin’ is a popular choice. This plant, with its red foliage, makes a bold statement when planted as a roadside hedge. Conifers that will form a thick, impenetrable barrier must include the *Cupressocyparis* range. ‘Leighton’s Green’ and ‘Naylor’s Blue’ are among the more popular types. These will grow to 6 metres and need to be trimmed annually to form neat hedgerows. They are tall growing so are often seen in the country as farmhouse and yard shelter. For the town garden the camellia tree is another option to use. The plants can be trimmed to form a thick, lush barrier against the wind and give good privacy.



Even though they can be clipped to form a square hedge they will still flower in the winter months and add a flowery display to their façade. Some gardeners prefer to choose a single camellia flower colour such as light pink but grow a hedge which includes the same colour shade in five or six varieties. This provides a hedge which flowers at different times through about six months. The hybrid and japonica camellias will grow fast and provide a taller, thick hedge while the sasanqua camellias are small leafed and can be trained to be narrow width wise. Far better for a slim, garden dividing barrier within the garden itself. Ideal for hiding the shed, compost bins or clothesline. Box hedging remains the most preferred low hedge. It defines garden areas and driveways and can be a great asset to the garden. At The Fragrant Garden, all the herbs have to grow to seed stage to ensure continuing nursery production. By late summer they are untidy and sprawling but tucking them in behind a neatly clipped box edge formalizes the view and makes it all look a lot tidier than reality! Lonicera nitida or box honeysuckle is a good plant to grow if a hedge about a metre tall is wanted. There are now three colour tones to choose from that can tie in with the house or garden colours – plain green, yellow tinged or bronze/purple tones.

Now is the optimum time to prepare the area where the hedge is to be planted. All plants benefit from good soil and turning over the hedges site and adding compost and nutrient is going to help the plants get well established with the coming cooler weather.

Gardening is always ongoing.

“I always say a gardener who says he has finished his garden is a liar. You never finish gardening do you?”

Herbally Yours,
Marilyn and Ian Wightman

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