

LIGHT

Continued from Page 1B

Where we live, day length is less than 10 hours from early November until early February, putting plants in a three-month holding pattern. In this way, winter gardens serve as a living pantry, storing fresh food until you're ready to pick it. The solstice falls right in the middle of this agricultural intermission, and with it marks the shift from losing daylight to slowly regaining it. Though the gain amounts to a few extra minutes each day, those minutes are significant, heralding the return of the sun and its life-generating properties.

The primary condition of winter — for both plants and humans — is that of darkness, not cold. Plants manage by shifting their growth habit. Our response, from ancient times until the present, has been to imagine a way out.

Over time, we have imbued this time of darkness with celebration and meaning. Anyone who has ever lit



New York Times News Service

Americans began watching a yule log on TV in 1966. It's one of the ways we bring light to the long periods of darkness during the winter.

a menorah or sat at the foot of a twinkling Christmas tree knows that the black of night can be made luminous. We endure the impending darkness by looking forward to family and neighbors gathered for revelry, tables spread with decadent feasts, buildings trimmed with colorful lights, and the deeper significance each of our traditions represents. We know the days will lengthen, that spring is not far off. With a touch of impatience, we taunt it, beckoning the sun with effigies.

In Japan, Toji (winter sol-

stice) is celebrated by taking a hot bath scented with yuzu, a type of orange that looks like little suns bobbing in the bathwater. In Poland, one tradition marks the evening of Dec. 24 with a feast, but only after the first star in the sky has been spotted in the night sky. Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, celebrates a flame sprung from oil and faith. In France and its diasporas, Reveillon is the traditional Christmas Eve feast. A word that means "waking," Reveillon invites those who can muster a second wind to feast after midnight

mass. Perhaps it also hints at the reawakening of light, the coming of dawn after a feast of darkness. Because memory is so closely tied to flavor and scent, familiar holiday foods also illuminate the season with their happy associations.

Though its origins remain largely unknown, the yule log has long held an enchantment over December nights throughout much of Europe. Nothing more than a hunk of solid wood — a large limb or small tree trunk — yule logs were dragged into homes, even barns, and set (sometimes only partially) in a hearth large enough to accommodate their size. This rustic, slow-burning fuel was lit with a charred piece of last year's log to symbolize the burning away of misfortune and bad choices, its light glowing with the warm hope of a prosperous new year. Darkness cleanses, light renews. Even in the digital age, the yule log holds its grip on us in the form of looped videos of lit fireplaces (called, endearingly, Yule Log Videos) that we play just for

the chance to gaze into that crackling, sun-like fire.

Each of us burns our own yule log of memory during the holidays. Lit by small associations — the smell of cookies baking, the sound of bells jingling, a certain song, an old ornament, the way lights shining through the Christmas tree branches make feathery patterns on the wall — we set a whole body of memories and emotions glowing inside us. With warmth and camaraderie, they ground us in the season's rituals, distract us from the ever-shrinking days, and make the darkness seem almost fun.

Sarah West is a writer, cook, and gardener who lives in Cove.



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GIFTS

Continued from Page 1B

SNOWFLAKE MIX

Yield: 16 servings

3 cups bite-size rice square cereal, such as Rice Chex
3 cups bite-size corn square cereal, such as Corn Chex
1½ cups small pretzel twists, squares or sticks
1 cup honey-roasted peanuts
24 ounces white chocolate chips or baking pieces
9 ounces mint M&Ms

1. In a very large bowl, combine rice cereal, corn cereal, pretzels and peanuts. Set aside. Lay out a large piece of waxed paper or parchment.

2. Melt white chocolate in a metal bowl over simmering water, stirring constantly. Pour melted chocolate over cereal mixture. Stir gently to coat. Spread on waxed paper and sprinkle with mint M&Ms. Allow to cool, and break into pieces. Store in an airtight container for up to 1 week or in the freezer for 1 month.

Per serving: 457 calories; 21 g fat; 11 g saturated fat; 11 mg cholesterol; 6 g protein; 63 g carbohydrate; 38 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 384 mg sodium; 132 mg calcium

— Adapted from *Midwest Living*

WINTER ORANGE POMEGRANATE ICED TEA

Yield: 6 servings

3 cups water
1 navel orange, cut into ¼-inch slices
1 cinnamon stick, broken
6 whole cloves
4 orange-flavored or black tea bags (decaffeinated is fine)
1 cup orange juice
1 cup pomegranate juice
2 to 3 tablespoons granulated sugar

PLANNING

Continued from Page 1B

5. Visit a nursery specializing in native plants and flowers. Buy one to try. Being native, it should do well here.

6. Add organic matter to your soil. (Just in one small area at first; just to see if it really works).

7. This could be your year to try your hand at designing a flowerbed.

8. In March or April take a walk in the woods to appreciate the woodland wildflowers. Try pressing one or two in an old phone book.

9. Grow a flower, vegetable,

or variety of tomato you have never grown before. Start it from seed.

10. Feed the birds this year. (You get at least twice as many birds if you also provide a source of water that does not freeze).

11. If you have never had a vegetable garden, grow at least one item of food for your table.

12. Remember that gardening is a belief in the future, and be more thankful this year that you can be a part of growing something. All you have to do is want to.

13. Promise yourself that you will plant at least one tree. If you have no space to do this,

it also counts to give one as a gift. Don't know who to give it to? Contact a school or public park.

14. To be kind to your garden and rid yourself of insect predators, put up a bird house or bat house. Also consider a feeder and a source of unfrozen water.

15. Visit a public garden. Observe both the landscaping and hardscaping (the stone and concrete work). Note the use of color and plant combinations. None of this is "copyrighted" so feel free to copy what pleases you. Take a notebook, sketchbook, or camera so you don't forget what

you have seen.

16. Go to a state park you have never seen before. Get a good look at some of the native plants in their natural setting where they are the most vigorous. You may see trees or plants you would like to grow. While there, absorb some of the peace and beauty.

17. Visit the gardens of your friends. If you like what they did with color or plant combinations, you may want to do it, too. Your friend may even help you.

If you have garden questions or comments, please write: greengardencolumn@yahoo.com. Thanks for reading!

3. Divide popcorn mixture between prepared baking pans; spread evenly. Place pans on 2 oven racks. Bake 32 to 40 minutes, rotating pans between upper and lower racks halfway through baking, and stirring occasionally.

4. Cool mixture completely in pans on wire racks, about 1 hour. Break apart any large clusters of popcorn when cool. Store in tightly sealed containers at room temperature up to 2 weeks.

Per serving: 259 calories; 16 g fat; 6 g saturated fat; 20 mg cholesterol; 5 g protein; 27 g carbohydrate; 20 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 73 mg sodium; 23 mg calcium

— Slightly adapted from *Good Housekeeping*

SLOW COOKER DULCE DE LECHE

Yield: 56 servings

2 (14-ounce) cans sweetened condensed milk

1. Divide the sweetened condensed milk among 4 (6-ounce) canning jars or 3 (8-ounce) jars. Secure lids. Place in a slow cooker, adding enough hot tap water to cover by 1 inch. Cook on low for 11 to 12 hours or high for 5 to 6 hours, or until thick and richly colored, like dark copper.

2. To check doneness, use tongs to remove a jar. If the color looks good but you aren't sure it's thick, you can open a jar to check consistency; if necessary, secure lid again and return to cooker. When fully cooked, remove jars with tongs. Cool to room temperature; store in refrigerator for up to 3 weeks. The cooking process does not create a vacuum seal, so the jars must be stored in the refrigerator.

Per serving: 61 calories; 2 g fat; 1 g saturated fat; 7 mg cholesterol; 2 g protein; 11 g carbohydrate; 11 g sugar; no fiber; 24 mg sodium; 54 mg calcium

— Slightly adapted from *Midwest Living*

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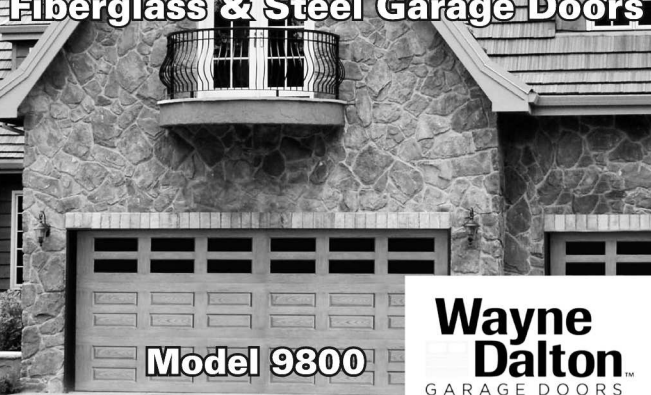
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