



Catalogs remind us that spring will come

Last week I received three seed catalogs. The seed companies know that in spite of global warming and all the politics in the world, spring will come again. Seed catalogs to me mean there's reason to have hope in the future.

Spring is one of the certainties we can count on. There are a lot of other certainties. For instance: If I buy another book on organizing and cleaning my house, it's certain that I will live in a house of whimsical chaos every day of my life. I always hope that even in the midst of chaos, cleanliness can sometimes prevail.

The beautiful pictures in the seed catalogs are supposed to make me want too many things. I'm learning to exercise a bit of caution and think of the limited space in my small yard. I'm not always as wise as I wish, but ordering seeds is less expensive than ordering plants or buying them at a nursery.

When the ground is covered in snow, the house cats can't find any of the grass they usually snack on, so it is now kitty grass season. Buy wheat seeds at a health food store and start a tablespoon of them growing. Soak them first for 24 to 48 hours, then when you see signs of sprouting, plant them in a plastic cup of damp potting mix. In no time you will have your own kitty grass.

Be sure to order seeds early. Some are limited in supply, and if you're starting them yourself, you need to have seeds on hand so you can plant them in little cups by the end of March. (Peas can be planted outside in March or April. They get sown directly into the ground.)

Garden chores

- On cold nights, move houseplants back from icy windows to prevent chilling injury.
- Overwintering geraniums like bright light and cool temperatures. Keep soil on the dry side.
- Be sure newly purchased plants are well-protected on their trip home. Exposure to icy temperature for even a few moments can cause injury.

Holiday poinsettia basics

- Keep away from drafts, furnace registers and radiators.
- Night temperatures in the 50s to low 60s, and days at around 70 degrees.
- The soil should dry only slightly between watering. Discard the drainage.
- Be sure to punch holes in the decorative foil wrap to prevent soggy conditions.

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

Christmas Cookies From Around The World



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Christmas Mailanderli.

SHEET TREATS

By Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

I know a woman whose family always left out a shot of whiskey for Santa, along with cookies. In the morning, the glass would be drained, and there would be cookie crumbs on the plate.

The booze, instead of the more traditional glass of milk, may say more about her father than the actual Santa Claus. But the important part of this story, for our current purposes, is the cookies.

Cookies are as much a part of Christmas as candles and caroling. They are the gift that everyone loves, the holiday snack supreme. In many respects, they are the reason for the season.

And it is not just in America, by any means. In other parts of the world, too, Christmas cookies are as part of the holiday tradition as whiskey is in certain neighborhoods of Chicago.

So this year, I decided to make holiday cookies from around the globe. To be honest, most of them come from Europe, because many of the best cookies come from there. One batch was from New Mexico, because they seemed so intriguing. And after all, New Mexico is part of the globe.

I'll start with the New Mexico cookies first. They are called Biscochitos, and they are literally the state cookie of New Mexico. In the Land of Enchantment (which is to say New Mexico), they are typically served for big occasions and especially for the holidays.

They turned out to be every bit as delicious as I had hoped from the description: they are crispy shortbread cookies infused with the flavors of anise and orange, and topped with a sprinkling of cinnamon sugar.

There is, however, one thing about them that gave me pause: Traditionally, they are made with lard.



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Finnish Christmas pinwheels (Joulutorttu)

I just couldn't do it. Lard cookies somehow seem ... wrong. So instead I used shortening, which is widely recommended as the second-best fat for biscochitos. It worked great, and the cookies turned out every bit as crisp as you could want them.

I next turned to Finland to make Joulutorttu, which are Finnish Christmas pinwheels with a dollop of prune jam in the middle of each one.

I know: A lot of people are vaguely repelled by the idea of prune jam. But the stuff is quite good, and if you don't want to buy it at a store, it is ridiculously easy to make yourself.

Still, if the idea of prune jam leaves you feeling clogged, you can always use raspberry jam.

In fact, I'd recommend it if that is what gets you to try Joulutorttu.

These cookies begin with the softest dough I've ever felt. That is because they are not only made with flour, butter and a little baking soda, but also whipped cream.

Not whipping cream. Whipped cream.

The dough is folded over on itself a few times, too, like puff pastry. The result is a cookie that is almost like pastry in both taste and texture, marvelously flaky and not too sweet. And it's all topped off with prune jam. Or raspberry, if you insist.

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HOME PANFORTE

A Tuscan Christmas

By Amy Bizzarri
Chicago Tribune

Christmas in Tuscany would not be complete without a slice of panforte — the peppery, dried fruit and nut-based spice cake born in the central Tuscan hill town of Siena in the Middle Ages — served with a glass of vin santo, a sweet Italian dessert wine.

Several legendary origin stories surround panforte. Some culinary historians believe it was inspired by lokum, aka Turkish delight,

the ancient date- and nut-based confection popular in different forms in several Middle Eastern countries to this day, brought back to Tuscany by medieval-era crusaders. According to local lore, Sienese soldiers won the Battle of Montaperti against their rivals, the Florentines, in 1260, thanks in part to the spiced treat, which is not only packed with protein-powered energy but also travels well.

In Siena, the cake was once considered a cure for a variety of ailments and was

originally prepared by spice merchants, the pharmacists of the Middle Ages. The traditional recipe calls for 17 ingredients, one for each contrada, or neighborhood, of Siena (the same contrade that compete against one another in the palio, a passionate horse race held in the heart of the city, Piazza del Campo, twice every summer since 1633, with just one pause during the two World Wars).

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Abel Uribe / ChicagoTribune-TNS

The secret to making exceptional panforte is to use high quality ingredients, including freshly ground spices; organic, farm fresh nuts and dried fruits; and a top-notch honey.