



EATER'S DIGEST
SARAH WEST

Defying the darkness of the season

Most countries around the world know this time of year as the holiday season. What, specifically, your holiday is makes little difference to those in the business of commodifying it. That our traditions get covered in twinkling lights, wrapped in bows, and sold back to us with a twist of sentimentality is, perhaps, just the way things go. Traditions, like memories or favorite recipes, aren't static things, after all. As we grow and change, the ones that survive must shift with us.

Yet, underneath this season's rituals lies a common foundation. We celebrate this time of year — like we always have — as a balm for darkness. Mid-December brings the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. On the Dec. 21 winter solstice, daylight lasts a mere 8 hours and 42 minutes at our latitude. These extra hours of dark press on our dispositions. In the midst of them, we sometimes feel downhearted, anxious, hungry or fatigued. In the garden, most plants retreat underground or into protective woody trunks, mirroring our desire for rest and reflection. Those rugged individuals that can bear the cold (grasses, evergreens, and in the vegetable patch, kale and other hardy greens, carrots, and beets) are stopped by darkness.

Especially in the northern latitudes, short days limit plant growth even more than the cold does. Most plants require a stretch of at least 10 sunlight hours to produce significant new growth.

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BETWEEN THE ROWS
WENDY SCHMIDT

Planting plans for next year's garden

It is the time of year that we resolve to be better people and turn over a new leaf. Our goal is to try to be more perfect forms of ourselves. . . pushing the obsessive-compulsive envelope to be even better, even more perfect perfection. In my mind I can do that without imagining any obstacles. In my mind, reality has never had a chance to grow.

There is a collision of sorts when my better self tries to cope with the world, and the very real problem of soil, and dirt, and sunlight, and the rain I have ordered not arriving when I had planned. Is the universe now into the idea of back-ordered promises? I'm offering you a few resolutions and possibly some excuses or coping mechanisms for you and your garden/landscape to make it through 2019:

1. Place a plant or tree in your yard specifically for use by wildlife. A shrub or tree for cover; flowers for butterflies; a plant with fruits, berries, or seeds to eat.
2. Try using biological controls instead of using chemicals.
3. Try composting.
4. Share a special plant or seeds with a friend. Or, enclose a package of seeds in a card when you know your friend enjoys gardening. This can be for a birthday, or just out of the blue.

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Homemade Treats As Holiday Gifts



J.B. Forbes/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Caramel crunch popcorn

MADE TO MUNCH

By **Daniel Neman**
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

When you care enough to send the very best, you know that the very best is often homemade.

A box of candy is a lovely gift, and so is a big tin of flavored popcorn. But they just don't have that personal touch.

To show your friends and loved ones that you care, make them a gift yourself. Homemade food gifts are always appreciated, and they can be simply wonderful.

The ones I made are good. I mean really, really good. And don't tell anyone, but they are also easy. I mean really, really easy.

How easy? The Slow Cooker Dulce de Leche is literally nothing more than pouring canned sweetened condensed milk into jars, placing the jars in a slow cooker, adding water and turning on the heat.

Admittedly, this one gift does take time until it is done, but you can be off doing other things while it is cooking at a slow and even temperature. It takes about 11 to 12 hours on low heat — you can make it overnight — but I made it on high heat in six hours.

And what I had at the end was honest-to-goodness dulce de leche. If you've never had it before, maybe you should make a jar for yourself, too. It's impossibly rich, impossibly creamy, impossibly delicious. The flavor is sort of like caramel, but it's somehow better and more intense than caramel.

There are other ways of making dulce de leche that take less time but are more laborious. Traditionally, you slowly simmer together milk and sugar, stirring occasionally, for at least an hour and a half. But that takes a lot of standing at the stove.

The slow-cooker method allows you to set it and forget it for about six hours or so. When it's done, it can be used in any number of desserts, from pastries to the filling of sandwich cookies to an unbeatable sauce for ice cream. But to be perfectly honest, a lot of people just eat it out of the jar.

It's that good.

Almost as easy to make as the dulce de leche is Winter Orange Pomegranate Iced Tea. It's the perfect gift for an iced tea lover like me. It's iced tea with extra zing and a holiday flair.

Instead of using regular water to make the tea, you begin with water that is flavored with orange, cinnamon and cloves. You steep the tea bags in this water for five minutes before adding orange juice, pomegranate juice and sugar.

Do add the sugar. I don't like my iced tea sweetened at all, but this one needs it to counteract the tartness of the pomegranate juice.

The hardest part of making this iced tea gift is finding the bottles to put it in. I bought some shaped like soft-drink bottles for \$2 apiece, and even as I was paying for them I was thinking "I could just buy soft-drink bot-

les for \$1 and actually have the soft drink."

I also made a big batch of Caramel Crunch, because it's so easy and who doesn't like it? It is the familiar blend of popcorn and peanuts coated in caramel.

Some say that it is impossible to crunch and munch such a homemade treat, that it cannot be made at home. Poppycock, I say.

The popcorn is easy; I used a microwave. But the caramel, which is usually tricky to make, is also easy. You just melt butter with granulated and brown sugars plus some corn syrup, bring it to a boil and add a dash of baking soda. Simple, but it becomes light and crispy and does a terrific job of coating the popcorn.

Finally, I made something called Snowflake Mix, which is just a different form of Chex Mix. This one begins with Rice Chex and Corn Chex, plus pretzels and honey-roasted peanuts. You coat it all with melted white chocolate, and then comes the ingredient of true, unadulterated genius: mint-flavored M&Ms.

It's like eating a beautiful snowfall, wintry and cool and refreshing. It's got crunch, it's got peanuts, it's got pretzels. It has everything your friends and loved ones will want in a snack.

They'll be singing "I'm Dreaming of a White Chocolate."

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Snowflake mix

