

Gardening is healthy for mind, body



ANN BLOOM
NUTRITION: IT'S ALL GOOD

It has been a long, cold, dark winter in more ways than just the weather. With the spring months, though, comes the hope of warmer days and sunshine. All which spells seed catalogs in mailboxes, and garden implements in the hardware stores. April is National Garden Month, and there are many health benefits associated with gardening.

Gardening is an easy thing to learn how to do. One can start out simply by finding a suitable piece of ground that receives at least six hours of sunlight per day, waiting until danger of frost has passed and the ground has warmed before planting the selected seeds. Once you have prepared your garden earth by turning it over and incorporating some compost into it to provide nutrients to your plants, you can plant the seeds, following the instructions on the packet. Most nurseries also have seedlings of vegetables and herbs that are available for home gardeners. The staff at the nurseries are also knowledgeable and willing to answer questions for beginning gardeners.

For beginning gardeners, green beans, chives, sunflowers, lettuce mixes, spinach and zucchini are all good choices as they tend to grow well with minimal effort. As you build on your experience and successes, you will find what works for you and what you like, and you can begin branching out to try different seeds and plants. Container gardening is also an option if you are short on space. Patios and decks lend themselves well to containers of cherry tomatoes or other types of tomatoes, herbs and flowers.

Along with the satisfaction of seeing the fruits of your labors, is knowing you are developing a lifelong skill. There are also several health benefits to gardening. One is growing fresh food that you can eat. Your food is steps away from your kitchen to your table, rather than traveling hundreds or even thousands of miles from farm to store to your house. Therefore, gardening promotes healthy eating.

Gardening also encourages children to try different fruits and vegetables. Studies have shown that children who grow their own food are more likely to eat what they have a hand in growing.

Robert Hutchins, MD, writes in an article for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's website "UNC Health Talk," that gardening can also build self-esteem.

"Maybe you don't think you were born with a green thumb, but after tilling, planting, nurturing and harvesting plants, you might see a slightly different person in the mirror: a person who can grow things and is a little more in tune with the earth," Hutchins writes.

Since gardening is a physical activity it is good for your heart, builds muscle mass and is a weight-bearing activity which helps build bone strength. It also burns calories and can help you lose or maintain weight. It also helps reduce stress, which can help with depression and anxiety and may help you sleep better; with so much negativity the last few months and years, it is important to see things growing and thriving.

Being outside in the sun also helps you get a good dose of Vitamin D. Vitamin D is important for bone health, too. Vitamin D is also called the "sunshine vitamin" because it takes sunlight on our bare skin for our bodies to produce Vitamin D. It is important to remember to apply sunscreen before going outside, even on days that are overcast. The period with the strongest sunlight is between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

With the onset of COVID-19, and families becoming overwhelmed with "screen fatigue," gardening provides an outlet. The physical activity of putting a shovel in the soil, weeding and planting helps release natural mood-boosting chemicals in the brain, helping to reduce stress. Gardening is an activity the whole family can enjoy.

The website Alliance for a Healthier Generation points out that gardening offers opportunities for experiential learning saying that gardening can provide teachers with a way to integrate different subjects with nutrition including math and social studies. In addition, gardening also fosters social and emotional skills. The website's article, "Health Benefits of Gardening," states that gardening helps children develop skills such as sharing and taking turns. Gardening helps children develop self-confidence, learn how to work as a team, and take responsibility. It also encourages children to learn about the environment and take care of nature.

So, as mailboxes start filling up with seed catalogs and the gardening sections of stores start stocking all those rakes and hoes, we can all start dreaming of sunnier days and what we can plant in our own gardens. Spring will be here before we know it...



Richard Tsong-Taatarii/Minneapolis Star-Tribune

Rachel Swan pours the just whipped meringue batter into a pan.

A slice of heaven

Angel pie turns lemon meringue on its head

By SHARYN JACKSON
Minneapolis Star Tribune

MINNEAPOLIS — It took years for Rachel Swan to come around to her grandmother's angel pie.

The dessert that flips lemon meringue pie on its head, literally, was Swan's father's favorite. But not hers. "I only have a memory of putting it in my mouth and spitting it out," she said on a recent morning in her south Minneapolis shop, Pie & Mighty. It was a textural thing — the airy crunch of meringue isn't for every kid. "But my dad loved it and it was like this special bond that he had with his mom."

After her dad died in 2010, Swan inherited a copy of her Grandma Lu's recipe, and after years of testing variations, she has managed to perfect — and fall in love with — angel pie. It's become one of her bakery's signature items.

Angel pie, which has a meringue base in place of a traditional crust, is a throwback recipe for a spring gathering, with the bonus that it's gluten-free and features undulating waves of whipped egg whites along the edges.

And the best part? It's not difficult. It takes only a short list of ingredients and a strong mixer. The hardest part is waiting for the meringue to harden in a closed oven (Day 1), and then for the assembled pie to set in the refrigerator (Day 2). However, deftness with a piping bag or a steady hand with an offset spatula are advantages, as sticky uncooked meringue can be a challenge, for some, to spread prettily on a pie plate.

Angel pies are usually filled with a custard or fruit curd, which solidifies in the fridge and allows the delicate meringue to retain its crunchiness beneath. But you could just as easily fill the pie with a big pile of homemade whipped cream streaked with jam and topped with macerated fruit. Or try butterscotch pudding, or chocolate ganache.

The closest culinary comparison is an upside-down lemon meringue pie, and lemon is probably the best place to start when making angel pie.

"It's light, it's ethereal, it's tart, but it's also sweet — it's like all of my favorite things in one dish,"



Richard Tsong-Taatarii/Minneapolis Star-Tribune

Rachel Swan fills in the rest of the pie with lemon "goop."

said Zoë François, the Minneapolis-based cookbook author, who featured Swan's lemon angel pie on her television show, "Zoë Bakes."

Though its origin isn't totally clear, angel pie's popularity peaked in the United States in the '50s and '60s, just as other somewhat fussy and finicky dishes that involved piping, braiding, layering and other adornments were standards in mid-century kitchens.

A recipe for angel pie appeared in the first publication of "Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book" in 1950 as a variation on a "schaum torte," which is a traditional Austrian dessert that translates to "foam cake."

It also shares roots with the pavlova, a dessert that, according to legend, was created for Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova in the 1920s during one of her tours to Australia or New Zealand. The crunchy-on-the-outside, chewy-on-the-inside free-form pile of meringue is usually topped with berries and whipped cream. It's known for its loose and beauty, like its namesake. Let loose and smash the whole thing up, and you'll have the traditional English dessert Eton Mess.

Up North, you'll find more relatives of angel pie at a pair of famed pie shops along Hwy. 61. The five-layer chocolate pie at both Betty's Pies and Rustic Inn retain a pastry crust, but fill it with cinnamon meringue underneath a layer of

chocolate mousse. (Rustic Inn has three flavors of meringue-crust angel pies on its menu, too.)

With so many versions of meringue-and-cream desserts out there, it's a wonder to some fans why angel pie remains such an obscure slice of heaven.

"I put it in the category of baked Alaska and icebox cakes, and all of these desserts that are just absolutely delicious and beautiful," François said. "I don't know why they left our kitchen repertoires. But they're coming back."

At Pie & Mighty, Swan can't make enough of her Grandma Lu's Lemon Angel Pie. When she puts it into her shop's weekly rotation, it sells out fast. But since it takes several hours for the meringue to set at a super-low heat, a batch of 30 pies ties up her ovens for an entire day. Portioning them out to get more pie to more people isn't an option, because — as beautiful as an angel pie is — slicing it can get messy.

"I think the reason why this pie fell off the radar is that it takes time and practice, and we don't have that anymore," Swan said.

Fortunately for home bakers, active baking time is minimal, and angel pies are easy to reproduce at home.

And it might just be time for a comeback, with a little help from Swan's Grandma Lu.

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