



# Trowel Talk!

September, 2015

## Ancestors turned to herbs to keep it spicy

Nowadays we can obtain herbs and spices from all over the world for culinary use. We can grow the seeds used to flavour many exotic dishes, cook these dishes ourselves or sample them in restaurants specializing in cuisines from around the world.

Our ancestors did not have the choices we enjoy today. While some spices did find their way north with returning travellers, the main spice trade with the East Indies and other islands in the Indian Ocean really grew and flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries. These spices were not always affordable except to the wealthy, pepper in particular being priced almost as high as silver or gold. The poor grew herbs and vegetables in any tiny space available and preserved and stored what they could. In northern climates, their winter diet was limited to root vegetables like carrots, turnips and onions as well as any hardier green vegetables that would grow through the winter months. These included members of the cabbage family like borecole, kale and collards and also spinach, orach, chard and mustard greens.

These winter greens were known collectively as potherbs, meaning those that were cooked in a pot rather than grown in a pot.

### Trowel Talk!

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- Editor: Mary Ann Van Berlo
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Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*)

Whereas herbs like thyme, marjoram and bay leaves were used in small quantities for flavouring, potherbs were used in large quantities to provide variety to the winter diet. People would often forage along roadsides and ditches for wild plants that we might consider a form of survival food nowadays. Weeds, from pennyroyal, lamb's quarters and horseradish to plantain, purslane and vetch, were all desirable additions to the pot and provided useful nutrients and vitamins. After Lent, a traditional Easter dock pudding of dandelion, burdock and nettles was always very welcome.



Lavender is also used to flavour food.

These potherbs were a staple of winter even though they were considered very humble fare. In contrast, the rich might dine on griddled trout with rosemary, rabbit stew with barley, sage and bay leaves or a pigeon pie with ginger, pepper and cloves. Sallets were usually served first and would consist of young greens eaten raw and flavoured with fresh scallions, thyme or sage. Bread was often flavoured with ginger, saffron or marjoram, while soft cheese might be blended with mixed herbs.

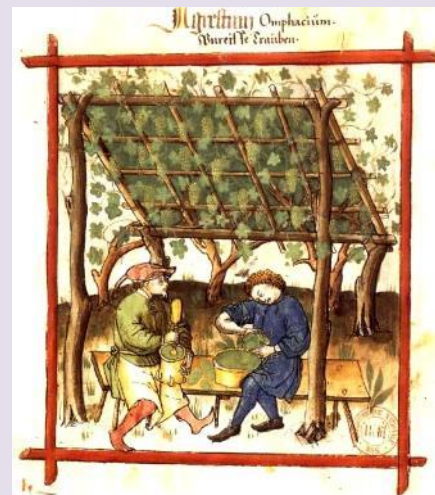


Photo: Courtesy of The Bibliotheque Nationale de Paris

Other flavourings used were almond milk, bacon fat, honey, olive oil, pomegranate seeds, verjus, vinegar and wine as well as the many varieties of the onion family. In the days before refrigeration, fresh milk didn't keep well and almond milk was used instead. It was made by soaking ground almonds in boiling water and then straining the milky mixture. Verjus was pressed from unripe grapes and used instead of vinegar to add a 'sprightlie soursesse' to sauces or salad dressings. If grapes were not available, the juices from sour apples or sorrel might be used instead.

Whether it was the rich man in his castle or the poor man at his gate, potherbs, herbs and spices played an important part in every diet, as they still do today.

Gillian Boyd  
Master Gardener

### Event of interest:

Join Master Gardeners on October 3<sup>rd</sup> for a day of learning about common garden insects – see page 3 for more details.



## Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

### Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

#### ONGOING:

**Telephone Help Line:** 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1–3 pm (all year)

**E-mail Help Line:** [mgoc\\_helpline@yahoo.ca](mailto:mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca)

- monitored daily

- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

#### CLINICS:

**Ottawa Farmers Market**, Lansdowne Park: Sundays, July to Sept, 9am-1pm

**North Gower Farmers Market**, 2403 Roger Stevens Dr, North Gower: Saturday,

Sept 19, 8:30am-1:00pm

**Richmond Fair**, Sept 17-20

**Carp Fair**, Sept 24-27

#### SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

**Making Scents of your Garden** – September 24 – 7:30 pm

Judith Cox, Master Gardener

380 Springfield Road, Ottawa

Hosted by the Rockcliffe Garden Club (Guest fee: \$7)

**Making Daylily Babies in the Backyard** – September 28 – 7:00 pm

Kelly Noel, Master Gardener

Cornerstone Community Church, 1728 Concession 11, Almonte

Hosted by Almonte and District Horticultural Society (No guest fee)

**You Are Not Done Yet** (fall gardening) – October 6 – 7:30 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Old Town Hall, 821 March Road, Kanata

Hosted by Kanata-March Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$5)

**Spring Bulbs – A must for every garden!** – October 19 – 7:00 pm

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Russell Legion, 24 Legion Lane, Russell

Hosted by Russell & District Horticultural Society (No guest fee)

**Gardens of the UK (Lake District & Scottish Borders)** – October 24 – 1:30pm

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Westboro Masonic Hall, 430 Churchill Avenue, Ottawa

Hosted by Ottawa Valley Rock Garden & Horticultural Society (No guest fee)

**Handy Fruits** (fruits grown at easy to reach heights) – October 26 – 7:30 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Charlottenburg Recreation Centre, Williamstown

Hosted by Williamstown Green Thumb (No guest fee)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: [mgottawaspeakers@gmail.com](mailto:mgottawaspeakers@gmail.com)

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>

### September TO DO List

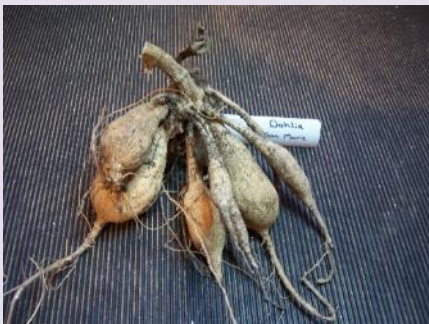
- Now is the ideal time to divide and/or move plants. Wait for an overcast day or a day when rain is forecast.
- Bulbs are available in the stores now. Buy them while the selection is good. If you can't get them in the ground right away, store them in a cool dark place but don't leave them too long, they need a chance to put their roots down before freeze-up.
- Garlic is another bulb that needs planting in the fall. There are many different varieties so try a few.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

### Tip of the Month

Lifting tender bulbs, tubers and corms (referred to as bulbs for simplicity) is best done after the plants have been touched by frost. Use a fork or spade to lift the bulb from the soil, using caution so as not to damage the bulb. Shake off any soil and trim off the green tops.

Allow the bulbs to dry off for a few days out of direct light (the garage floor is the perfect spot). Once they are dried off, inspect each bulb, removing any soft ones and trimming off damaged parts (trimming would only apply to dahlias and canna tubers).

Put a small amount of a powdered bulb fungicide in a bag, add the bulbs and give them a gentle shake to coat them with a light dusting of the fungicide.




A dahlia tuber ready for storage (including an identification label).

My method is to wrap dahlia tubers in newsprint and then store in a box with air holes punched in the box. Most other bulbs just go in a 'ventilated' box on their own – with each box being labelled as to its contents.

But in the interest of “do as I say, not as I do” the proper way to store bulbs

is to put them in a box with barely moist peat moss covering them.

Regardless of which storage method you use, the boxes of bulbs should be stored in a cool (above freezing), dark room. The bulbs should be checked monthly to ensure they are not drying out too much or conversely, too damp and getting mouldy.

A photograph of a bee in flight, positioned in the upper left quadrant, hovering over a large, vibrant yellow flower that dominates the right side of the image. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a garden setting.

**Come to an all-day seminar about  
insects in your garden!**

**Saturday, October 3 in Carleton Place**

**Registration fee \$30, includes lunch**

**Topics**

- Insect ID for gardeners: DIY and beyond
- What's for Lunch—Insects in your Ornamentals
- How Insects Look at Your Garden
- Wonderful World of Wasps!

**For details:**

- see [www.lanarkmq.blogspot.ca](http://www.lanarkmq.blogspot.ca) or  
[www.mgottawa.ca](http://www.mgottawa.ca)
- call 613-264-8135
- email [lanarkmq@gmail.com](mailto:lanarkmq@gmail.com)

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**Brought to you by the Master Gardeners of  
Ottawa-Carleton and Lanark County**