



Gardening Insights

April 2010

Crispy oatmeal cookies

My wife Susan bakes these delightful cookies which are based on a recipe originally published in a 1949 "Woman's Day" magazine. It was a frugal recipe which contained no eggs and called for lard instead of butter. Frugal or not, the resulting cookies are thin, crunchy, and very tasty. They are great plain but are also nice with spices and nuts.

Ingredients:

- 1&1/4 cups packed brown sugar, dark or light
- 3/4 cup butter, melted and just warm (3/4 cup = 1&1/2 sticks)
- 1/3 cup buttermilk, plain yogurt, or soured milk (make by stirring 3/4 teaspoon lemon juice or cider vinegar into 1/3 cup milk and let sit a few minutes to curdle)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1&1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 3/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups oats, quick or old-fashioned (not steel cut)

Options:

- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1/2 cup finely chopped nuts

Directions:

1. In large bowl, combine ingredients in order given, and mix thoroughly by hand
2. Set aside about 15 minutes to allow oats to soften, and in the meantime
 - preheat oven to 375 degrees F.
 - lightly grease 2 cookie sheets

(Note: Dough can be refrigerated several days for later baking.)

3. Drop small spoonfuls (about 1-inch size) onto cookie sheet about 2 inches apart, then flatten each to about 1/8 inch thickness by pressing with a flat-bottomed glass - first lightly grease the glass bottom and dip in white sugar, then squish a cookie and dip in sugar between each squish.
4. Bake 10 - 12 minutes until cookies look dry and edges start to brown.

These cookies freeze very well.





D.I.Y. Pruning Saws

With the right tools, pruning trees is very satisfying. This might sound corny, but it's a way to bond with your trees as you sculpt their branches and shape them for beauty and health. Felco and Corona are good brands for hand pruners, saws, and loppers, but my favorite pruning tool is one I make myself. It consists of a 2 to 3 foot long wooden handle and a curved blade. The weight and stiffness of the handle make it easy to use and it is a good length for most ground-based pruning*. I've never seen anything like it in catalogs except for telescoping pruning saws which I find much too wobbly. Here's how to make one for yourself: it requires power tools and **extreme caution** because the saw blades are wickedly sharp. Materials are available at any good hardware store.

Materials:

- One 2 to 3 foot long wooden handle - preferably a hickory maul handle with a pre-cut slot in front.
- Two 1 inch long barrel screws with 1/4 inch shafts (see detail photo above).
- Four small washers that fit the barrel screws.
- One replacement pruning saw blade with triple cut teeth.

Steps:

1. Use a wood file and put a small chamfer on the front edge of the handle where the saw blade fits. If you're not using a pre-slotted handle, also add a 2 inch long slot at the end of the handle making sure the slot is straight and centered. This is easy to do with a band saw.
2. Drill two 1/4 inch holes in the saw blade if they don't exist already. Clamp down the blade and wear heavy gloves. You must use sharp drill bits made for hard steel. I like Irwin Speedbore bits for this job.
3. Using the drilled blade as a template, mark the handle and drill two 1/4 inch holes all the way through.
4. Put washers on the long end of the barrel screws and slide them through the handle and blade. A little soap on the barrel screw makes it slide in easier. Then put washers on the other end and insert and tighten the short end of the barrel screw. If the barrel screw sticks out above the surface of the wood handle, file it off before screwing in the short end of the screw. Tighten screws so the saw blade is held firmly in the handle.

** I don't work on ladders to prune and I never climb trees. High canopy pruning is best left to professional arborists like Juan Barba and Aleck MacKinnon. Their numbers are 622-6938 and 990-7032 respectively.*





Plant of the month

Chiltepine - *Capsicum annuum*

v. *aviculare*

The chile pepper has become a world-wide favorite in cooking and one popular version is the fiery hot chiltepine. The little round berries pack a big punch for their size and have an almost smoky hot taste.

Chiltepine is a terrific landscape plant too. Tuck it under the cover of a native mesquite and see that it gets a little extra water during the dry part of summer. It will reward you with a deep green crown of leaves and white flowers followed by 1/2 inch round globular fruits that are good eaten fresh or dried. Depending on the severity of the winter, it can stay mostly green or lose all its leaves. A plant should last several years in the ground and might reseed itself in favorable locations.

Chiltepine is the only chile pepper native to Arizona. In fact, there is a Chiltepine preserve in the mountains near Tumacacori to protect the gene pool of this culinary and botanical treasure.

Opportunities

Nat'l Pollinator Week - June 21 to 27

Tohono Chul Park will host a celebration of National Pollinator Week with a three days dedicated to native pollinators (bees, birds, bats, butterflies) and native plants. The main event is on Saturday, June 26th from 9 AM to 5 PM. It includes six free lectures and several workshops (macro photography, bird banding, pollinator gardening), along with displays and exhibits by 12 local environmental organizations. I will be there demonstrating how to build bee habitats and selling my artistic versions. Stop by and see me!

On the previous Thursday and Friday nights, two special lectures will be presented. Speakers include Drs. Stephen Buchmann and Ted Fleming, along with Christie Williamson and others.

Co-sponsors of the event are the Pollinator Partnership, Tohono Chul Park, Bat Conservation International and Tucson Audubon Society.

Go to TohonoChulPark.org for details.

Other notes

In the next issue:

- El Porvenir: 20 years of helping the poor in rural Nicaragua
- Great small trees for AZ landscapes
- My favorite tree books
- Banana yucca



The name "Creosote" conjures up images of black sticky toxic goo. I can't help but think it puts people off planting our wonderful native plant also known as *Larrea divaricata*.

I suggest we give the plant a new name that plays up its qualities. How about "Desert pussywillow"? The shrub's fuzzy gray fruits look a lot like pussywillows and make the shrub glow in late spring light.

"Desert pussywillow" is a fine multi-purpose landscape species and might be the longest-lived plant on the planet. Some scientists estimate the oldest ones at 11,000 years!

I'm for renaming it - how about you?



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