

Plant Lovers Almanac

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The warming weather, the accumulation of heat units that drive flower development on plants and emergence and development of insects, the wakening of spring peepers, ah what a time of year. The storm a Saturday ago covered with snow the croci emerging in Wooster, then the snow melted on Sunday, and by Monday the croci were pushing up through the leaf mold in my yard and were in full flower by Tuesday. No foolin'!

Time will tell how much damage to plants occurred this winter, but certainly many varieties of grapes were blasted, including woody tissue and buds from the past several seasons of growth. Peach bud survival does not look good in many cases. Bark cracking on plants is being reported by Extension educators Randy Zondag in Lake County. Nursery growers report that this is the latest they have had to wait to dig trees in their memory. Forsythia bloom – I suspect there will be very little, but we shall see.

Before we completely change the page, it is of course quite possible we will still see some serious chill, as if we needed the reminder we received this past weekend. It was quite beautiful, though, come Sunday morning. The scenes in Johnson Woods Nature Preserve near Orrville were an enchantment. Last vestiges (hopefully) of ice, tracks of animals on the boardwalk and woodland snow cover, and patterns of snow on the trees matched by a deep blue sky.

The Last Name That Plant Contest. We had a number of correct entries last time, with the first correct answer of...potato (*Solanum tuberosum*), arriving early Saturday morning. Some guessed tomato, though you can call it pot-ay-to or pot-ah-to, but you cannot call it tomato. Others were thrown off by not thinking through the fact that potatoes have flowers and fruits. Remember that botanically, a fruit is the ripened ovary of the flower that develops around the fertilized eggs that become the seeds. Thus, botanically tomatoes are fruits ripened around the seeds inside and potatoes have fruits with seeds inside as well, though these we do not eat. As for the part of the potato we eat, it is the enlarged underground stem of the plant. I indicated that “almost everyone enjoys this plant in one form or another”. From French fries to mashers, from chips to certain vodkas, potatoes delight, and are quite nutritious, though we of course typically augment with lots of fat and salt, tasty but not so good for us in excess.

Though we are what we eat, we often do not think through the reality of from whence our foods come. There is of course the old adage that many people think milk comes from the grocery store instead of the cow. I had some fun with my wife Laura's 2nd grade class on St. Patrick's Day, and asked them how many of them often ate potatoes and tomatoes on the same plate. One, maybe two, children raised their hands. When I asked how many liked ketchup on their French fries – aha, there was enthusiastic unanimity. Or should I say, “umamimity.”.

Say what? Let us hereby coin the word “umamimity”. *Umami* has gained acceptance among food scientists as the fifth flavor, along with sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. *Umami* is based on certain glutamates and nucleotides that are concentrated in monosodium glutamate (MSG) and occurring naturally in foodstuffs such as certain seaweeds, soy sauce, certain dried fish pastes, and **cooked tomatoes**.

Umami is said to round out the flavor of food, to provide a mouthwatering sensation on the tongue, to provide a brothy flavor. Cooks have long taken advantage of this without knowing the chemical composition, all the way back to the Roman Empire times and more than a millennium later with the development of classic French cuisine. Italian cookery employs it with the combination of parmesan cheese with tomatoes and mushrooms. *Umami* is said to be a key aid to culinary enjoyment of some elderly people who have lessened capacity to take in the tastes and aromas of their meals.

We come by our enjoyment of *umami* naturally, with its relatively high presence in --- breast milk. Food scientists, of course, are aware of all this, and *umami*-bombs are orchestrated into many newly marketed foods. Which brings us to a wonderful essay for you to read: “The Ketchup Conundrum” written back in 2004 on the website gladwell.com by Malcolm Gladwell, the author of many intriguing books, from “The Tipping Point” to “Outliers” to most recently, ‘David and Goliath’. Check it out. While you are at it, check out Michael Pollan’s latest book “Cooked” which also has a good discussion of *umami*.

The New Name That Plant Contest

Our new Mystery Plant is a multi-stemmed shrub or small tree that is a wonderful harbinger of spring, with its chartreuse-yellow flowers that emerge before the leaves truly representing the sunny-side up-ness of the season. The cherry-like fruits of autumn are tart and tasty with the juice a great flavor and color addition to apple cider, and from fruits steeped in vodka a la Lois Rose, were once famously described by Mary Beth Breckenridge as “chewable alcohol”. The first to e-mail or text me this Saturday will get a copy of Aldo Leopold’s conservationist classic, *A Sand County Almanac*. E-mail is chatfield.1@osu.edu. Phone is 330-466-0270.

To close: let all of us feel the greening, the awakening, our everlasting return to our youthful spirit within.

“*April hath put a spirit of youth in everything.*” William Shakespeare (Sonnet XCVIII)