

Bamboozles found in garden

By Arthur O. Tucker

The other day I received a catalog for gardening with kids. They offer an "Herbal Tea Garden" with seeds of peppermint.

Well, peppermint (*Mentha × piperita*) is a naturally occurring hybrid of two species, spearmint (*M. spicata*) and watermint (*M. aquatica*). As a hybrid of two nominally accepted species, it is intensely sterile.

Well, maybe I should qualify that: peppermint does have 0.0002 percent seed fertility, however, that level of fertility is not enough to create commercial levels of seeds. The seeds that are offered as peppermint seeds in North America are supplied by a German company and germinate to a rank-odored spearmint.

I investigated this decades ago and wrote to the companies, and, except for Johnny's Selected Seeds in Maine (much to their credit), all responded with the question "Who cares?" This is not an isolated case of simple mislabeling or gardening con games; below are a few others that I have encountered.

•**French tarragon.** French tarragon is a sterile selection of Russian tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculoides*), best designated as a cultivar ("Sativa"). The first mention of tarragon as a culinary item was in Italy in the 12th century, so it was probably selected prior to that time.

True French tarragon, besides being sterile and only propagated by cuttings and divisions, is redolent of an anise-like or basil-like odor. It has a sweet, numbing taste on the tongue. Russian tarragon sets abundant seed but it smells of shoe leather and does nothing to the tongue. If you make Sauce Béarnaise like Julia Child's made, please, please, please use plants of French tarragon, not seed-propagated Russian tarragon.

•**Mosquito geranium.** Plants of a rose geranium, called "Citrosa," are often offered at garden centers as a mosquito repellent. This is nothing more than a \$2 rose geranium with an outlandish claim at \$10-\$12.

Along with mosquito researchers in Canada and Florida, we found that the whole plant of "Citrosa" geranium had no repellency whatsoever. Crushed "Citrosa" had 30 to 40 percent the repellency of DEET (the standard mosquito repellent developed by the U.S. Army).

However, crushed lemon thyme had 60 percent the repellency of DEET and crushed catnip fared even better than DEET. The story that the companies supply with the "Citrosa" geranium



Submitted photo

True Greek and Turkish oregano has green bracts and white flowers. If yours has pink bracts and flowers, consider using it for dried flowers, not your pizza or spaghetti sauce.

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says that this was created by the fusion of citronella grass and a geranium circa 1975 by a Dutch scientist, but we have not been able to substantiate that, and the essential oil is just a variant of the old-fashioned rose geranium.

•**Oregano.** My father enjoyed his food and had an adage, "If it tastes good, eat it." Many plants of labeled "oregano" on the market today smell of musty leather, not oregano. These imposters also have pink flowers and bracts. The true oregano (*Origanum vulgare* subsp. *hirtum*) has white flowers and green bracts and a biting, almost creosote-like edge like the wild-gathered oregano of the grocery shelf.

Crush and smell the leaves of the plant of "oregano" before putting down your hard-earned money. If it doesn't smell like it should be on pizza, leave it alone!

These are but a few of the bamboozles in the garden that I have encountered. I thought that I had seen everything, but then last year I encountered "Magilla Perilla." All the ads and Web sites swear that this is a selection of the genus *Perilla*, not *coleus* (*Solenostemon*). There are subtle microscopic characters that identify "Magilla Perilla" as a *coleus*, not *perilla*, but think about these facts.

Coleus is a tender perennial that can be carried over in the greenhouse. *Perilla* is an annual; it flowers, sets seed, and then dies; it cannot be held over in the greenhouse except as a poor, pathetic, dying plant. "Magilla Perilla" is easily carried over from year to year as a tender perennial. Not convinced yet? The garden centers also offer "Magilla Vanilla." Does anyone think that this is a vanilla orchid in disguise?

I mentioned Sauce Béarnaise, which is an emulsion of egg yolks and butter flavored with shallots and French tarragon. It is absolutely delicious with steak. Here is a recipe that our family has followed down through the years. The time spent in its preparation is well worth the effort.

Sauce Béarnaise

¼ cup wine vinegar
¼ cup dry white wine or vermouth
1 tbsp. minced shallots or scallions
½ tsp. dried French tarragon
¼ tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. black pepper
3 egg yolks
1-1½ sticks (4-6 oz.) butter or margarine

Boil the vinegar, wine, herbs, and seasonings in a small saucepan until liquid has reduced to about 2 tbsp. Let cool. Beat the egg yolks with a wire whip for a minute or two, then add to herb liquid. Add 1 tbsp cold butter. Place saucepan over low heat and stir egg yolks with a wire whip at moderate speed, removing pan from heat from time to time when it cooks too fast. When the yolks form a creamy layer over the wires of the whip, immediately remove from heat and beat in the butter, 1 tbsp at a time. If the sauce curdles, plunge immediately in cold water and continue to beat until corrected.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call (302) 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.

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