

# The bountiful candies and cookies of the holidays

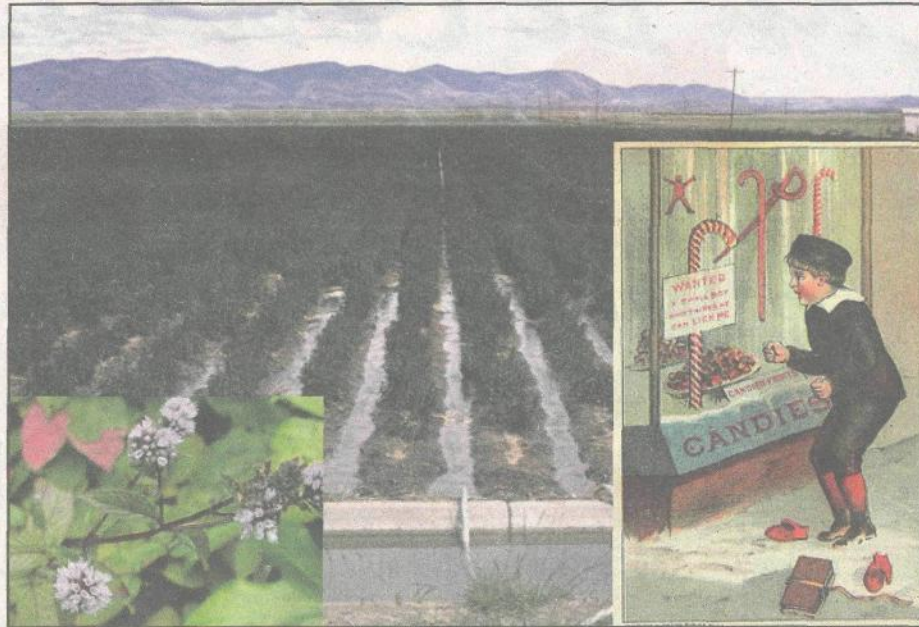
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I have numerous articles and even books on the traditional plants of the Christmas season: fir trees, holly, mistletoe, poinsettias, wreaths and Christmas roses. I even have an article on the botany of a fruitcake. However, nowhere is anything written about the botany of those quintessential symbols of this time of the year, the red and white striped peppermint candy canes and holiday cookies.

Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) is the leading essential oil crop in the U.S., raised primarily in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho today. Peppermint has a long history, at least since the early 1700s when "Mitcham," still the principal cultivar grown today, was discovered in Hertfordshire, England. Supposedly the first historical reference to a candy shaped into the now-familiar cane was in 1670 in Cologne, Germany, where the local choirmaster bent sugar sticks into something resembling a shepherd's staff for children.

The first reference to striped (but straight) candy canes in the U.S. appeared in 1844, when Eleanor Parkinson published "The Complete Confectioner." Candy canes associated with Christmas in the U.S.

## Garden Tales



Submitted photo  
**From commercial fields in Oregon and surrounding states, peppermint is processed into oil to flavor everything from toothpaste to our familiar candy canes for the holidays.**

are documented at least by 1874 in The Nursery, a Monthly Magazine for Youngest Readers.

Many other legends about candy canes arose in the 20th century in order to teach children about Christianity. For example,

supposedly the candy cane represents "J" for Jesus, and the red and white stripes represent Christ's blood and purity.

While we probably don't need the extra calories during the holiday season, be assured that peppermint is beneficial (be-

yond covering up bad breath), as shown in repeated, refereed scientific publications. Peppermint has been shown to relax the gastrointestinal smooth muscle by reducing calcium influx, thereby relieving irritable bowel syndrome and intestinal cramps in humans.

Besides reducing colonic and diffuse esophageal spasms in humans, peppermint reduces cholesterol synthesis (at least in rabbits). A combination of peppermint oil and ethanol has a significant analgesic effect with a reduction in sensitivity to headaches.

The sand tarts so symbolic of the holidays in this area were supposedly developed as Christmas tree decorations in Germany to substitute for the unconsecrated hosts that were originally used. If you want a really, really thin cookie (we always strive for something as thin as a thick manila folder), then you must chill the dough and marble rolling pin. We pull off a handful of cold dough and leave the rest in the refrigerator until used. If you make these in summer, then go the extra mile and purchase two marble rolling pins to refrigerate and have on hand.

Here is our family's Pennsylvanish Deitsch (Pennsylvania German) recipe for sand tarts, passed down through the generations of my Alsbough ancestors from Mount Joy, Pa.

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## Garden

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- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter or margarine
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract (or lemon or orange extract)
- 4 eggs

flour to thicken to a stiff dough (about 6 2/3 cups)

Work butter and sugar together. Add vanilla and eggs. Add flour to make a very stiff dough. Chill overnight. Pull off wads from chilled dough and roll out with a heavy rolling pin using plenty of flour (the thinner you make them, the better they taste, but when you realize the difficulty of rolling this dough out, you can fully appreciate paper-thin sand tarts). Cut with tin cookie cutters; decorate with colored sugar, jimmies, or ground nuts. Gently transfer to greased cookie sheets (a spatula works well). Bake at 350°F until the edges are slightly brown (thinner ones will bake faster, and levels in your oven will also influence the time; so watch carefully!). Cool on wire racks (they are soft when first removed from sheet). Store in airtight containers. These freeze well if kept air-tight.

Gingerbread people are also traditional in our family during this time. Here is an-

other revered family recipe, passed down through the generations.

- 1 1/2 cups butter
- 2 cups brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup cooking molasses
- 4 3/4 cups flour
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 2 tsp ground cinnamon
- 4 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp ground cloves
- 2 tsp powdered ginger

Cream butter and sugar, then cream in eggs and molasses. Sift the remaining ingredients together and mix the cream mixture with the dry ingredients. Chill overnight or several hours. Roll out onto floured board and cut with cutters. Place on greased cookie sheet and bake until slightly brown on edges (about 10-12 minutes) at 350°F. Cool on racks as above and decorate with icing as desired.

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.