The bountiful candies and cookies of the holidays

By Arthur O. Tucker
Delaware State University

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.

Garden Tales

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 Supposedly the first historical reference to a candy shaped into the now-familiar cane was in 1670 in Cologne, Germany, where the local choirmaster bent sugar sticks into something resembling a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 1894 when Eleanor Parkinson published "The Complete Confectioner." Candy canes associated with Christmas in the U.S. 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, supposed 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 (beyond 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 make 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 Pennsylvania Dutch (Pennsylvania German) recipe for sand tarts, passed down through the generations of my Alsbaugh ancestors from Mount Joy, Pa.

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