

Winter gardens a family tradition

By Arthur O. Tucker

My father loved the outdoors. He enjoyed hunting and fishing and seemed to know everything about nature. He also imbued this love to my mother and me and inspired me to learn the names of plants.

As a hippie-before-his-times and survivalist in the late 1940s/early 1950s, we lived in a house that he built with his own hands in the middle of a forest full of bloodroot, black cohosh, sas-safra, mayapple, etc. Summers were spent camping and hiking as a family in the Poconos. As a kid, I was embarrassed of my parents, but now I look back and view that lifestyle as idyllic.

On every April 15, my mother knew she count on being a fishing widow. I remember when my father first took me, at age 5, to his favorite trout stream near Allentown, Pa. As we were about to leave, he asked to see my creel. I had filled it up with Confederate violets and other plants to take home. From that point on, he knew that I was cut from a different cloth.

At his deer camp in the Poconos, he was the camp cook. I had grown up with guns and food animals at our small farm, but he knew that I was not keen on hunting deer. Yet, in spite of his time spent cooking and hunting at the deer camp, he always managed to bring home bushels of teaberries, pipsissewa, mosses, ferns, and bits of rocks and wood for us to make traditional Pennsylvania German winter gardens together.

Except for a great-grandfather from Wiltshire, England, who provided the surname, almost all of the rest of the family was from Palatinate in Germany before 1800.

Bringing a bit of greenery into the house during the bleak winter months is very traditional in

Garden Tales

northern Europe. The Swedes bring in birch branches, and our Christmas tree industry owes a debt to this practice, too.

Among the Pennsylvania Germans, it has been traditional to make a tiny winter garden in a bowl. This later evolved into an elaborate crèche, called a "putz," in churches in Southeastern Pennsylvania. I remember our family's annual "putz tour" among the churches in Bethlehem and Allentown around Christmas. Even the local Greek Orthodox Church got into the swing of things and put on their own version of a putz. The largest putz was at the Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem, and they still continue this tradition every Christmas.

Today, the winter garden has merged with the tradition of the terrarium. This can be as simple or elaborate as you want. As a teenager with limited funds, I used to save discarded gallon pickled pepper jars from the local food distributor (I knew the owner, and he used to leave the lids whole for me). All my windows in winter were lined with different winter gardens. My bedroom had poor heat, and often my windows were coated with frost, so some of these winter gardens were fashioned after temperate ecosystems with plants gathered from our own local woods.

I was always fascinated by the tiny ferns and seedlings that emerged, as if by magic, awakened from their winter slumber. In the warmer windows, other winter gardens housed tropical plants with tiny African violets, glöxinias and other miniatures from the Allentown and Quaker-town farmers market. All these winter gardens had a layer of coarse gravel and charcoal on



Wikipedia.com photo

Teaberry (*Gaultheria procumbens*) is popular for winter gardens in Pennsylvania but less common in forests in Delaware.

the bottom to counter occasional overwatering.

If you want to create your own winter garden/terrarium, be sure to visit the selection of plants at the Philadelphia Flower Show March 1-8. The theme this year is "Bella Italia."

I started with memories of my father, and I close with his version of a corn and oyster chowder: a simple, warming dish to serve after you make your own winter gardens with your children.

Pappy Tucker's Deer Camp Chowder

8 medium potatoes, peeled and diced
 4 medium onions, diced
 1 cup milk
 1 can (17 oz.) whole yellow corn
 1 can (17 oz.) creamed yellow corn
 1/4 lb bacon, cut into half-inch pieces
 4 hard boiled eggs
 1/4 lb butter
 1/2 tsp dried savory or thyme
 24 medium fresh stewing oys-

ters or 1 can (8 oz.) whole boiled oysters

Place diced potatoes and onions in kettle. Cook in 1 cup water until potatoes are almost tender (about 30 minutes). Add milk and corn. Fry bacon until crisp, drain, and add bacon. Cut up boiled eggs and butter and add them with savory. When potatoes are tender, add drained oysters and simmer for about 20 minutes longer. Salt and pepper to taste. Serves eight. This can also be baked in a two-crust pie shell (cook, for the last 20 minutes, in pie shell at 375 degrees F.).

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.