

Herbs Make Scents

THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA
VOLUME XLV, NUMBER 4



SOUTH TEXAS UNIT
APRIL 2022

Co-Editors Linda Alderman (ewalderman@comcast.net) & Janice Freeman (janicehfreeman@comcast.net)

April 2022 Calendar

- Apr 8 & 9, Fri. & Sat. 10 am** **Westbury Garden Workdays** at 12581 Dunlap Street 77035
- Apr 16, Sat. 7:00 pm** **Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom gathering for Members Only)
- Apr 19, Tue. 10:00 am**
(Note Date Change) **Day Meeting** “*Dyeing Easter Eggs with Natural Dyes*” presented by **Donna Wheeler** at the home of Donna Wheeler. Bring your sack lunch, dessert will be provided.
- Apr 20, Wed. 7:00 pm**
(Note Location Change) **Evening Meeting** “*The Use of Medicinal Herbs in Pre-Hispanic and Traditional Mexican Medicine*” will be presented by **Liliana Cracraft, PhD, MPH**. Liliana is a retired medical educator, researcher, and administrator at the University of Texas Health Science Center. The program will be in person at Lott Hall, formerly known as the Hermann Park Historic Clubhouse, 6100 Hermann Park Drive, Houston, TX 77030. Watch your email and our Facebook page for updates and current COVID-19 guidelines.
- Apr 24, Sun. 12:00:pm** **Cyanotype Workshop** Refer to flyer on page 6.
- Apr 27 & 28 Th. & Fri.** **Annual Meeting** of Members in Charleston, South Carolina

May 2022 Calendar

- May 7, Tues. 11:00 am** **Members Only Potluck and New Member Orientation** Refer to Invitation on page 3.
- May 13 & 14, Fri. & Sat. 10 am** **Westbury Garden Workdays** at 12581 Dunlap Street 77035
- May 16 Mon. 7:00 pm** **Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom gathering for Members Only)
- May 18, Wed. 7:00 pm** **Evening Meeting** “*Southern Grown Herbal Tea Blends*” will be presented by **Kim McHugh**, Certified Tea Blending Master and creator of McHugh Tea Room and Gifts in Bellaire, Texas. The program will be in person at the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion in Hermann Park (1500 Hermann Drive, Houston, TX 77004). Watch your email and our Facebook page for updates and current COVID-19 guidelines.
- May 25, Wed.** **Due Date** for Annual Charitable Garden Donation Submission
- Newsletter deadline: the 25th of every month is strictly enforced**
(May Editor is Janice Freeman)

Happy Birthday!

4/01 – Janice Dana

4/21 – Kathy McDaniel

Herbs for
Aries & Taurus
Chervil, Basil,
Wormwood, Mint &
Catnip



Genovese Basil



Chairman's Corner

Greetings,

Highlights of the last Board Meeting and other news you can use:

- A monetary gift was sent to **Donna Fay Hilliard's** church in her honor.
- Invitations to apply for the Madalene Hill Scholarship have been sent to 25 colleges and universities.
- We currently have around \$1500 in the Scholarship Fund. Additional funds have recently come from memorial donations honoring **Barbara Ownby**.
- Kudos to **Nicole Buergers** and **Laura Mullen**, the new hosts of Full Moon Ramble. They have provided a fun, informative and tasty look at the HSA Herb of the Month on each full moon Zoom. Make it a point to join them this month. Kudos also to those of us who have led classes or workshops for other groups: **Susan Wood, Catherine O'Brien, Janice Freeman, and Janis Teas**.
- **Laura Mullen** volunteered to run for the HSA Board position of Treasurer. The HSA elections will be held at the April Annual Meeting.
- We wish safe travels to our Vice Chair **Karen Cottingham** (who will officially represent us), **Laura Mullen, Dena Yanowski** and **Donna Yanowski** as they travel to Charleston for the Annual Meeting of Members.

The biggest thing on my agenda these days (besides surgery) has been the planning of our Members Only Potluck and New Member Orientation on Saturday, May 7. We are also planning to have a plant exchange and Herbal Trivia game with prizes!!!

Here are some of the people who are helping put this together. If you see something you would like to help with, call the person in charge.

Logistics: Catherine O'Brien is in charge of setup and cleanup. I know she could use some "extra muscle" to help with setup and and take down activity. If you can volunteer or if you know of someone who could help, contact her.

Food and Beverages: Rose Wherry will head up arranging the food and organizing beverages. I know she could use a hand.

Decorations: Pam Harris and Cynthia Card are coming up with table centerpieces that will be the prizes for our trivia game.

Plant Exchange: Lois Jean Howard and Beth Murphy will coordinate the plants. They ask that you start cuttings and seeds now in order for them to ready for May 7.

Trivia Game: Part of the afternoon's entertainment will be some kind of question and answer game. **Dena Yanowski and Carolyn Kosclskey** are working on this.

New Member Orientation: Membership Chair **Carolyn Kosclskey** is working on an informative Power Point presentation with everything you need to know about HSA-STU.

Until next month,
Julie



you are invited to the

*South Texas Unit
Members Social
& Potluck Luncheon*

SATURDAY, MAY 7 AT 11 AM
SOUTHSIDE PLACE CLUBHOUSE
3734 GARNET STREET

New Member Orientation* Plant Exchange* Herbal Trivia

Bring your own dinner service and beverage container

Don't forget a potluck dish and plants to share



Plant Exchange-
Get Your Plants ready ahead of May 7th with seeds and
rooted cuttings. For questions, contact Beth Murphy.



**Announcing Our April 20, 2022
HSA-STU Evening Program**



**“The Use of Medicinal Herbs
in Pre-Hispanic and
Traditional Mexican Medicine”**

**Presented by:
Liliana Cracraft, PhD, MPH**



BACK TO OUR ROOTS

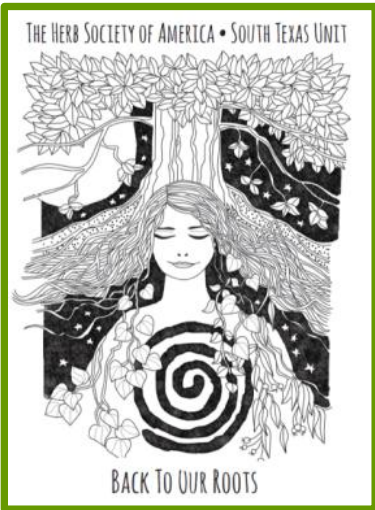
Julie Fordes

Back to Our Roots
Grow what you need...use what you grow!

What a joy it is to be outside these days!!

We had a beautiful and productive morning at the Westbury Community Garden Medicinal Bed. There were plenty of willing workers from our unit as well as the Westbury Garden. We celebrated the Vernal Equinox and the first day of Spring by planting lots of calendula and chamomile. We also put in a

Hilltop Oregano, one of Madalene's favorites. At the next workday, we will plant butterfly pea and holy basil. I hope to see you then.



WESTBURY COMMUNITY GARDEN WORK DAYS

Friday and Saturday

APRIL 8 and 9 @ 10 AM

12581 Dunlap Street 77035

TWO DAYS TO VOLUNTEER

Fertilizing, aerating, planting seeds and transplants
for the spring. Whatever needs to be done.

Come on out and join us!!!

**Bring a mug, I will bring hot water and we can take
a break with some fresh herbal tea.**

Julie



(L-R) Mary from WCG, Janice Stuff, Catherine O'Brien, Mary Nurre, Julie Fordes, Debbie Lancaster and Becky, Mike and a Good Samaritan from WCG. Not pictured, Janice Freeman.

Dry & Save These Herbs

We will make our special tea blends to sell at our fundraising events.

Oregano

Roselle (Hibiscus)

Rosemary

Passionflower (New)

Mexican Mint Marigold

Spearmint & Peppermint

Red-Stemmed Apple Mint

Calendula Flowers

Rose Petals

Chamomile Flowers

Thyme

Lemon Balm

Lemongrass

Lemon Verbena

Stevia

Sage



[STU Harvesting, Drying and Storing Herbs](#)



**COME ON OUT AND
PLAY WITH US!**

**THE HSA-STU IS
SPONSORING A
SPECIAL HANDS-ON
WORKSHOP WITH
CYANOTYPE ARTIST
CAROLINE ROBERTS**

“We’re Singin’ the Blues”

April 24, 2022, 12 noon to 3:00pm

How would you like to create your own botanical prints with a photographic technique that dates back to 1842? All you need are plants, light-sensitive paper, sunlight, and your imagination, and you can create beautiful “sun prints” like this. **Caroline Roberts**, a fine art photographer from the UK, will be your guide at her Houston home. Caroline finds the unpredictability and mystery of the cyanotype process perfect to express the beauty and variability of nature. See Caroline’s work at <https://www.carolinesroberts.com/>

All materials will be provided, and the fee for the workshop is \$50.00. You do not have to be a member to participate, but the workshop is limited to 15 participants. Register with **Karen Cottingham** at karen.redbrick@gmail.com

We’ll be making prints on paper, but the technique can be applied to fabric and digital photography as well. Caroline will also show you how to add text to your prints.

Masks are optional at this outdoor event.



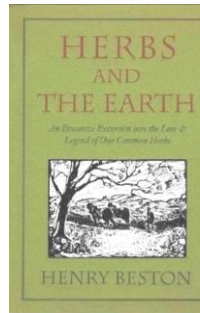
BOOK C O R N E R

If you have suggestions for books or other media members might like, submit your suggestions to Linda Alderman at ewalderman@comcast.net



The HERB SOCIETY of AMERICA

Booklist Recommendation



Writer/naturalist Henry Beston, a founding father of the environmental movement, believed that a strong connection to nature is essential. "It is only when we are aware of the earth and of the earth as poetry that we truly live," Beston says in his now-classic *Herbs and the Earth*. In this book, Beston shares one of those connections as seen through the oldest group of plants known to gardeners.

Calling All Speakers

Periodically, the South Texas Unit receives requests for a speaker to present at other organizations. If you have a plant that you are passionate about and want to share with others, please let **Catherine O'Brien** know. Contact her at Vibrio13@gmail.com or 281- 467-1139.

We can help you set up a PowerPoint presentation and teach you how to do voiceovers if you are not comfortable presenting in person. You could join their online meetings or you can present in person. If there is one thing that we've learned from this pandemic, it's that there are multiple ways to communicate with other plant lovers other than in person.

Janice Freeman presented "*Anything Herbs – Past, Present and Future*" on March 10th for the LaPorte -Bayshore Garden Club. She was joined by STU members **Donna Yanowski** and **Dena Yanowski**. **Rosie Haas**, Club Program Coordinator, and twenty club members attended the presentation, which was followed by a lovely luncheon at the Garden of Eden Floral - Tea Room. **Susan Wood** and **Catherine O'Brien** also presented in March and are not pictured.



Right: Janice Freeman
Left: Donna Yanowski



Janis Teas presented, "*Citrus Problems – What's Wrong with My Citrus Plant*" at the STU Evening Meeting, March 16, 2022



Michael Frederick presents "Mushroom Basics"



Karen Cottingham and Michael Frederick



Front (L-R) Mary Sacilowski, Debbie Welshimer (guest), Catherine O'Brien, and Donna Adair

Back: Donna and Doug Wheeler

Scenes from the Lone Star Mushrooms Field Trip

Carolyn Kosclskey

On Sunday afternoon, February 27, a large group of STU members and guests gathered at Lone Star Mushrooms near Tomball, TX. Since the day was so gorgeous, we gathered outside prior to breaking into two groups and touring the facilities. Owner **Michael Frederick** gave an informative introduction to our group telling the background of the business and how it came to be, and what we would expect to see inside. Everyone enjoyed the tour and afterwards were able to purchase mushroom growing kits, mushroom jerky, coffee and extracts. Many thanks to **Karen Cottingham** for organizing this trip. More information about this business may be found at

<https://lonestarmushrooms.com/>



Maitake



Pink Oyster



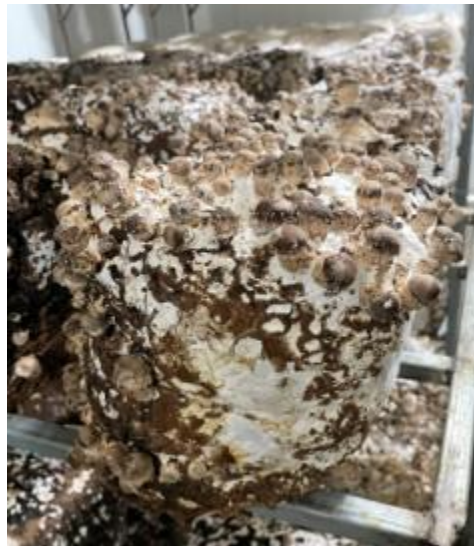
Blue Oyster

“Mushrooms: The Third Life-form; Identification and Usage”

Mark “Merriwether” Vorderbruggen, Ph.D.

Now available on Merriwether's YouTube channel.

<https://youtu.be/CnxzhqKZ58I>



Shiitake



Janice Freeman



Lion's Mane Mushroom



Pink Oysters



Growing Mushrooms





A Conversation with Kathy McDaniel, STU member since 1989

Carolyn Kosclskey, Membership Chair

We have two members with April birthdays and recently I had the opportunity to chat with one of those members, **Kathy McDaniel**, a STU member since 1989.

Carolyn – Kathy, tell me about growing up and what were your earliest gardening and herb experiences.

Kathy – I was born in Oklahoma and there were 3 children in our family. I remember my parents and grandparents had gardens of lovely landscaping, fruit trees, seasonal vegetables, and rows of cutting flowers. I grew up enjoying food with all kinds of herbs--mint, dill, parsley, basil, onions, garlic, thyme, oregano and horseradish.

Carolyn - Were you a gardener as a young person and later as an adult?

Kathy - While growing up I had a garden and also as an adult had a small garden. I grew what my mother called “practical herbs”, dill, parsley, chives, onions, garlic, basil, mint and fragrant herbs for making potpourri, as well as vegetables. After having children I made fresh baby food from what I grew.

Carolyn - What are your favorite herbs now?

Kathy - One of my favorite herbs is marjoram, and others are mints, chives, thyme, parsley, patchouli, and lemon verbena.

Carolyn - You’ve been a member of South Texas Unit since 1989, 33 years. How did you first hear about the group?

Kathy - I first learned about STU right after moving to Houston by reading Houston Home and Garden magazine. I especially enjoyed reading Madalene Hill’s articles “Thyme Being.” I then later met Madalene, Gwen and Jean Hardy at the Houston Home and Garden Show. They reminded me of my own family and I loved them right away. A bit later, one of my neighbors, Mary Versfelt, invited me to join the Unit in 1989 and we then became forever friends.

Carolyn - What are some of the activities you’ve participated in as a member?

Kathy - While an active member I participated in the Unit’s herb garden maintenance, meetings, Herb Days, the Herb Fairs, and crafts for both. I especially enjoyed helping with wreath making and selling the herbs.

Carolyn - I enjoyed getting to know Kathy and was impressed with her involvement with STU. As a retired R.N. she worked part-time for many years in the retail nursery business and wholesale growing business, and at Treesearch Farms in production for 22 years. Thank you Kathy for sharing these experiences with our readers. ■



Annual Charitable Garden Donation



As a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the knowledge, use, and delight of herbs, the HSA-STU allocates funds to gardens that share our vision.

We are now calling on our members to propose additional gardens that are deserving of our support.

We are looking for gardens that exemplify a dedication to herbal education.

Submit written proposals to *Julie Fordes* by *May 25th*. Proposals will be featured in the May issue of *Herbs Make Scents* newsletter.

Gardens that will be supported will be determined by vote of the membership at the Annual Meeting.



Garden proposals should be written and include who, what, where, when, and how about the garden.

Include if the funds will be used for special garden projects.

Include photos of the garden or project.

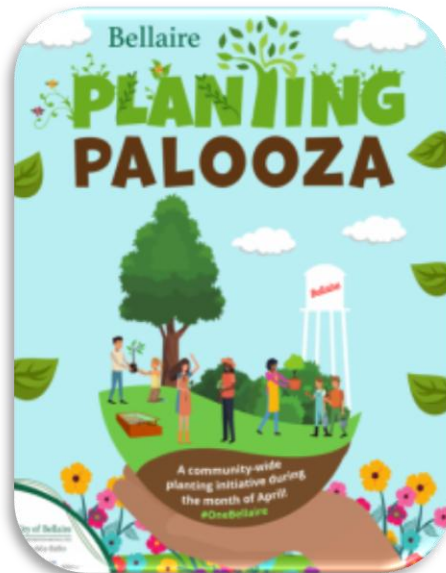
Proposals are due May 25th



PLANTING

Last year we made a fabulous video for this event. We emphasized growing herbs in containers and featured the gardens of members **Susan Wood, Beth Murphy, Lucinda Kontos and Debbie Lancaster.**

We have been invited to share our love of herbs again this year.



palooza@bellairetx.gov

PALOOZA

Instead of a big project, we are asking that if anyone has any pictures that they would like to share of their individual gardens, please send them to Bellaire Parks, Recreation, and Facilities Department by e-mailing Palooza@bellairetx.gov

If you have any questions you may visit the Planting Palooza website

<https://www.bellairetx.gov/1735/Planting-Palooza>



Garden Tips for April*

The beginning of spring this year has certainly been full of surprises in the garden. We have the tallest purple bearded irises ever and some little white daffodils with an orange cup are blooming much better than in years past. The bluebonnets on our corner are in full bloom, and we've started cutting the first bouquets of sweet peas. However, we are still having to protect some things. We had to bring in the seed trays and the 8 flats of herbs that I brought home from the Herbal Forum because of the high winds and cold temperatures last weekend.



This month the weeds will take over, and you will regret it if you don't pull them while they are small. They will crowd your new plants and take away needed moisture and nutrients. Put down dense mulch in order to smother weed seedlings and continue to fertilize cool-season annuals for more blooms. Pay close attention to watering your plants since we are going to have higher temperatures and drying winds in the weeks to come.

Now is the time to plant herb seeds like anise hyssop, basil, cumin, fenugreek, feverfew, and jamaica (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*). You can plant garlic chive sets and roots of ginger and turmeric. Set out plants of basil, chamomile, horehound, hyssop, lemon verbena, lemon grass, mint, oregano, patchouli, pineapple salvia, rosemary, sage, scented pelargoniums, sorrel, stevia, sweet marjoram, tansy, and thyme.

You may want to add colorful warm-season flowers such as begonias, celosia, cosmos, globe amaranth, impatiens, mallow, marigolds, nicotiana (flowering tobacco), pentas, petunias, portulaca, purslane, sunflowers, tithonia, torenia, and verbena.

Native herbs and flowers are a great addition to our gardens for the beneficial insects, butterflies, and birds. Some plants to consider are Hinkley's yellow columbine, red and yellow columbine, coreopsis, chili pequin, purple cone flower, and Monardas such as *M. didyma* (bee balm), *M. fistulosa* (wild bergamot), *M. punctata* (spotted bee balm), and *M. citriodora* (lemon mint).

There is nothing more enjoyable than to be out in the garden potting up seedlings or moving up plants into larger pots. Sometimes we get additional treats never experienced before such as yesterday when we saw a group of whistling ducks flying low overhead. I hope that everyone experiences some surprises of spring in the next month.

Beth Murphy, Garden Coordination Chair

***Reprinted from April, 2010 Herbs Make Scents**



Herbs Make Scents

April 2022

Membership Tips: Membership Categories

Carolyn Kosclskey, Membership Chair

Membership renewals will be coming up this summer August 1. There will be more information from the treasurer in the up-coming newsletters. Last count from the website membership page showed a total of 65 members, 55 of those listed as “**Active**,” which is the majority of the membership. Page 22-23 of the new Directory list the requirements of these categories and fees. Membership fees for Active membership are \$67.50, \$55 of that goes to the national organization Herb Society of America. Our website list six **Sustaining** members, members who have been in good standing for at least three years but are unable to meet full requirements for Active membership. A single membership fee for this category is \$80, \$55 of that going to the national organization. An **Affiliate** membership is for any HSA member, Unit member or Member At Large becoming an “affiliate” of another Unit. An example of that would be a STU member joining the Pioneer Unit in Round Top or the Texas Thyme Unit in Huntsville as an Affiliate member. STU has three Affiliate members and the membership cost is \$12.50. The last category is **Honorary** membership, a special membership conferred by the Board. We have one Honorary member, founding member **Rexford Talbert** who no longer lives in this area.



Do you wish the world were happy?
Then remember day by day,
Just to scatter seeds of kindness
As you pass along the way.

-Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919)



AT-HOME RECIPES



AT-HOME RECIPES

April 2022

Carolyn Kosclskey

*"No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn."
– Hal Borland*

The initial Roman calendar placed April as the second month of the year and it is believed that the name comes from the Latin word "to open" describing the flowers and trees "opening forth" at springtime. Easter, a movable feast which is always on a Sunday between March 21 and April 25, falls late this year and will be observed on April 17. How is that date figured? The formula for Easter 2022 was determined by the first Sunday (April 17) after the first full moon (April 16) following the vernal equinox (March 20).

A MONTH OF CELEBRATIONS

Without much good news to be found lately in the world it is a great time to create your own celebrations along with associated foods. In addition to Easter and Holy Week, there are birthdays of family, friends and don't forget our pets. In fact, April 3 is "World Party Day" encouraging everyone in the world to join in a celebration of life. April 21 is San Jacinto Day celebrating when Texas became a free republic in 1865—a great reason to make a Texas Sheet Cake from a pass-along recipe! When you Google "April 2022 holidays" there is at least one holiday for celebrating every day of the month.

GOOD FOR YOU COOKIES

From the files of Kathy McDaniel

When my husband and I first moved to Houston in 1974, our new across-the-street neighbor Carol DeDola welcomed us with a basket of her cookies. It was amazing how this lessened our anxieties as a young couple moving away from our families and friends. Since then I've done the same for others whenever possible.

Combine together in a large bowl

¾ cup whole wheat flour

¼ cup wheat germ

¼ cup powdered milk

¾ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon baking powder

¼ teaspoon baking soda

Stir the dry mixture with a spoon or whisk to combine.



With a mixer in a large bowl cream together

- ½ cup butter (1 stick)
- ½ cup peanut butter, creamy
- ¾ cup honey
- 1 egg
- 1 tablespoon vanilla

When mixed gradually fold in dry ingredients in thirds from the mix above just until blended.

Combine these ingredients in a large bowl and stir into the batter

- ¾ cup rolled oats
- ½ cup nuts, chopped
- 1/3 cup sunflower seeds, unsalted
- 1 cup golden raisins, chopped if desired
- 1 cup apricots, chopped
- 1/3 cup fresh ginger, grated (optional)
- 1/3 cup coconut, shredded (optional)

Set oven to 350° and grease cookie sheets or prepare with parchment paper. Use spoon or scoop to place dough on sheets. Bake for about 10 minutes. After removing from oven let cool about 10 minutes before transferring to a rack to cool completely. These store quite well but are usually eaten quickly!

INSTANT POT CARROTS WITH HONEY HERB BUTTER GLAZE

<https://zenandspice.com/instant-pot-carrots-honey-herb-butter-glaze/>

Carrots are a tasty dish any time of year and this recipe is made in an Instant Pot electric pressure cooker but may be easily adapted to stove top cooking.

Ingredients

- 16-oz. package baby carrots, rinsed
- ½ cup veggie broth
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme, minced
- 1 tablespoon fresh dill, minced
- 1/3 cup honey
- Salt and pepper to taste

Instructions

Add broth to Instant Pot. Place carrots in a steamer basket inside the pot. Lock the lid, close the pressure valve and “manual” cook for 3 minutes. Release the pressure immediately and take off the lid. Remove the carrots and set aside. Drain the liquid from the pot (save for another recipe).

Press the sauté button and add the butter, thyme, dill and honey and sauté until tender. Add cooked carrots and season with salt and pepper.



DYEING EGGS

In anticipation of Easter many of us will be dyeing eggs, an activity that dates back to the first century AD when Christians in Mesopotamia colored their eggs red in memory of the blood of Christ. Methods included using onion skins and placing flowers or leaves onto the shells before dyeing to create patterns. In modern times there are different types of dyes available for the process, the most common and traditional being store-bought kits. Other ways to color or dye include water color and acrylic paints, alcohol inks, permanent markers and paint pens, and natural plant based dyes, to name a few.

When selecting eggs to dye, the white eggs show the lighter colors better, and plastic and wooden eggs may also be used. There are plant-based dyes available through Amazon including butterfly pea powder or tea (blue), beet powder (pink), Roselle powder (pink) and matcha tea (yellow). Natural dye kits shown were Natural Egg Dye Kit, India Tree Nature's Colors and Watkins Assorted Food Coloring. Ingredients from your kitchen may include freeze-dried blueberries (purple), coffee (strong, brown), yellow onion skins (yellow), paprika (orange), red cabbage (blue), freeze-dried strawberries (pink) and turmeric (yellow). Dyeing requires 1 cup of boiling water plus 1 tablespoon of vinegar (lowers the pH allowing dye to adhere), plus dye material--intensity of hue depends on how much dye base is used. There is an abundance of information on the internet on dyeing eggs with plant-based dyes. An alternative method of dyeing eggs using whipped cream or topping seemed fun--plus, think of the many uses for the leftover whipped cream! Have fun with your family and friends dyeing eggs and enjoying them. These websites have instructions on dyeing eggs using natural dyes and using whipped cream or topping when dyeing (spinachtiger.com includes a video).

<https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/holidays/easter-ideas/how-to/a31737/natural-easter-egg-dyes/>
<https://mybakingaddiction.com/whipped-cream-dyed-eggs/> <https://howsweeteats.com/2019/03/dye-eggs-cool- whip/> <https://spinachtiger.com/how-to-color-eggs-for-easter-with-whipped-cream-or-shaving-cream/>

shchaslyvoho Velykodnya!

There were only 2 April birthdays in our group but there are twice as many in May. Members having May birthdays will be invited by email to submit a favorite recipe along with a story about how that recipe became part of their collection.

EARTH DAY
April 22, 2022



Ceremonial Tortillas - A Sacred Offering of Gratitude

Karen Cottingham



You may find it alarming, as I do, that our children are more familiar with advertising logos than they are with native plants and animals. And that food is “gathered” in the fast-food drive-through lane with no regard for the effort that brought it to the table. Reverence for nature has all too often been replaced by indifference and detachment, with terrible consequences.

Food mindlessly consumed in front of a screen provides fuel for our bodies, but very meager sustenance for our souls. Have we forgotten that food is an anchor to culture, family, and community? Food is a reminder of who we are, a necessary connection to our group. Ceremonial foods in particular have enormous symbolic and ritual significance, linking people with their past, their land, and their religion.

And when ancient rituals infuse the preparation, serving, and consumption of ceremonial food, it becomes a sacred substance that nourishes us on an emotional and spiritual level.

Indigenous people from around the world view certain traditional foods as sacred - salmon for the First Nations people in the Pacific Northwest, for example; millet seed for the Tharaka tribe in Kenya; and corn



throughout Mexico and Central America. Ancestral food systems are crucial for cultural identity, spiritual wellbeing, and even food security through land stewardship.

The *ñha-ñhu* (Otomí) people live in the central highlands of Mexico and have relied on corn for their sustenance for centuries. Their sacred food is a beautifully embellished ceremonial tortilla, a corn tortilla prepared according to age-old rituals and decorated with images from nature and religion. These special tortillas exemplify the peaceful integration of pre-Hispanic nature deities with Catholic saints and express a deep gratitude for the corn harvest, the family, and the community.

I think we can learn something valuable from this tradition. But first we must understand the vital importance of corn in the Mexican diet.



Teosinte, the wild ancestor to domesticated corn, is still grown for animal fodder.

Sacred maize, as depicted in the Codex Borbonicus, one of the very few Aztec codices that has survived, with its modern counterpart below

Scientists believe that ancient peoples developed edible corn about 7,000-10,000 years ago. In what science writer Charles Mann describes as “a bold act of conscious biological manipulation”, indigenous farmers transformed an unpromising grass called teosinte into the nutritious plant that feeds the entire world today.

By carefully selecting the seeds with the most desirable traits for each successive crop, ancient farmers successfully coaxed the tiny and unpalatable kernels of teosinte into today’s delicious "corn."

Maize became the dominant crop throughout Mexico, and as such, it was incorporated into the creation myths and religious beliefs of indigenous peoples. To the Maya, for example, corn was the primordial substance from which humans were created. According to the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred record of Mayan beliefs, the gods mixed their own blood with corn flour to create mankind. As children of the corn, the Mayan people believed it was their sacred duty to cultivate and protect the plant.



According to the Aztecs, corn was associated with the star cluster Pleiades and was brought to earth by the god *Quetzalcoatl*. They also seemed to have identified with corn, referring to maize as *tonacatl*, which means “our flesh”. In essence, then, humans and corn were the same substance but in different forms. A successful person was compared to a “ripe ear of corn” and children were encouraged to grow like the corn.



Centeotl, the Aztec God of *Maiz*, brandishes a couple of corn cobs. This pre-Columbian statue is in the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, Mexico.

Just as humans had some of the attributes of corn, corn was believed to have human characteristics. For example, just before cooking the maize kernels, Aztec women made sure to breathe on the corn. As the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún explains in the Florentine Codex, “It was held that in this way it would not take fright; thus it would not fear the heat.”

And should any grains of precious maize be found scattered on the ground, they were gathered up in great haste. As long as the grains lay crying on the floor, the careless act could provoke a severe punishment from the offended maize god.

Tortillas, as the main form in which corn is consumed, were also thought to embody human-like characteristics. According to food writer Paula E. Morton, “the Aztecs loved their tortillas and believed the tortilla had a soul.”

The personification of corn is a deeply rooted remnant from pre-Hispanic life that still persists in many communities. The following anecdote from the Native Seeds/SEARCH seed bank facility illustrates the continuing reverence for teosinte. Martina, a young Zapotec teacher who was visiting the seed bank, began to cry when she held teosinte seeds. She spoke of how her family and culture have stories about sacred teosinte, but she had never seen it herself. To hold these seeds was something very precious to her, something sacred. In her culture, teosinte is considered the mother of corn and corn is the mother of all human life. Holding these seeds was something very precious to her, something sacred.

For people like Martina, traditional food is more than just food - it’s a yearned-for connection to ancestors and their intimate interactions with the natural world. The deep spiritual significance of corn is evenly embedded in the Nahuatl language - “teosinte”, the name for primordial corn, comes from *tosintlī*, which means sacred corn.

The Maya and other indigenous groups of Mexico and Central America still hold corn ceremonies according to the agricultural cycle - at planting time, throughout the growing season, and at the time of harvest.

Members of the Otomí (*ñha- ñhu*) community in the central highlands state of Guanajuato, Mexico, also consider corn the “Giver of Life”, a sacred entity with its own animating spirit. Their social and religious life



is still organized around the ancient cycles of sowing, cultivating, and harvesting corn, although with the additional richness of elements of Catholicism.

For generations, the *ñha-ñhu* women have created specially decorated corn tortillas as an expression of love, respect, and appreciation. Through rituals blending indigenous with Christian beliefs, the *ñha-ñhu* give thanks for the bounty of nature and the blessings of the saints. The celebrations not only honor the day-to-day intimacy the *ñha-ñhu* experience with nature, but also commemorate the important transitions in their community and celebrate the feast days of their saints.

In recent years, members of the *ñha-ñhu* have begun to share this beautiful tradition with people outside of their community. The following descriptions of the ceremonies have been collected from articles originally written in Spanish. I have done my best to make sure the information is accurate when the translations were a bit cryptic.



Consuelo Venancio Mesita is one of the main spokeswomen sharing the traditions of her community. To be *ñha-ñhu*, she explains, is to be in balance with the environment, to recognize the delicate interaction of the community with the sun, earth, seeds and water. She adds that in her culture everyone is grateful, to “mother, nature, the wind, the sun, the rain and the air they breathe.” Gratitude and communion with nature are as essential to the *ñha-ñhu* identity as the corn they eat.

To forge this lasting bond with nature, and specifically corn, Otomí parents begin taking their children to the corn fields as infants.

Traditionally, the first ceremonial tortillas of the year are prepared to bless the seed for the year’s crop. In the month of March, the family selects the best seed from the previous harvest for planting. While shelling the dried corncobs, family members focus on thoughts of gratitude and pray for the successful reunion of the seed with the earth. Shamans might then take the seeds to Cerro Brujo, a sacred mountain where the blessings of the Sun and Grandfather Fire further amplify their life force.

The seeds are blessed again on the feast day of San Isidro Labrador (Isidore the Farm Laborer, c. 1070 - May 15, 1130), a Spanish farmworker known for his kindness to the poor and animals. Now doubly blessed, the seed is planted, along with their offerings of





ceremonial tortillas and prayers for the rain needed for a successful harvest.

According to Venancio Mesita, the Otomí culture teaches its members “to treat our seed (corn) like a treasure, as a part of you that you are going to offer to the earth... and you are going to dedicate all the care to it”.

The celebration of the agricultural cycle ends with giving thanks for the harvest. For each of the stages of the life cycle of corn, the women of the community prepare ceremonial tortillas as an expression of their respect and gratitude for nature.

The complex process of transforming corn into nourishment, and more specifically, the rituals required for making ceremonial tortillas are skills transmitted over many generations from mother to daughter. Otomí women have been putting images on tortillas for at least three centuries. The origins of the practice are obscure, but probably began as food offerings to agricultural deities and featured images of the earth and nature gods. As Spanish missionaries converted native inhabitants to Catholicism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the practice of making offerings to the gods was discouraged. According to family stories remembered by Venancio Mesita, the special tortillas were still made in secret and clandestinely left on the side of the road for the old gods.

Eventually, a harmonious syncretism evolved, and ceremonial tortillas bore images of nature and agricultural deities as well as images of saints. The most important image was that of the Holy Cross, its acceptance no doubt eased by superimposed the Feast of the Holy Cross on an older harvest festival in the fall.

More recently, as ceremonial tortillas have been adapted for secular celebrations, new images have become popular. If the tortilla has a drawing of doves and flowers someone in the family has recently married. The image of an eagle represents a triumph, and garlands might announce the birth of a child.

Images of animals including coyotes, rabbits, and deer are also popular:





The chosen images are transferred to the tortillas by way of hand-carved stamps passed down within families. Some stamps are carved with two designs, one on each side. Traditionally carved on mesquite wood, each stamp is unique to the family and to the celebration.

In a way, these stamps tell the story of each family, commemorating births and marriages, honoring saints as well as nature, and embellished with designs of their choosing. Each family has its own stamp, or set of stamps, and the identity of the family is contained within the stamps.

But while the specific designs may vary from family to family, in general, they all reflect the essential link with nature and gratitude for nature's gifts. The stamps also embody the successful reconciliation of pre-Hispanic tradition with elements of the Catholic faith.

In this way, the traditions and history of the ancestors are carried within the material, to be revitalized with each use. Their role in preserving the values and history of a culture is incalculable.



Toward the end of her life, the matriarch of the family chooses one of her daughters, or rarely, a daughter-in-law, to inherit the family stamps. Accepting the gift requires a commitment to continue the tradition of making sacred tortillas. The recipient must be generous, joyful, and respectful, and must have a deep understanding that the stamps represent the values, the spiritual beliefs, and the history of the family as well as of the entire community.

In keeping with the sacred nature of the offerings, the women who prepare the ceremonial tortillas must enter the kitchen "with absolute peace, the best disposition and joy". Even their clothing should be in the colors that represent joy.

According to Venancio Mesita, "You can not say bad words, you can not be angry and you have to make a prayer in the ñañu language thanking God and the ancestors for the food." Some women cover their hair and purify themselves with copal.

In the kitchen, an herb called Santa Maria (probably *Tagetes lucida*) emits a pleasant anise fragrance that "relaxes the senses of the one who prepares the tortillas".



A wooden figure representing Oton, the first leader of the Otomí people, is “asked for support”, and a little doll made of masa keeps the kitchen free from evil spirits.

And finally, it is very important to bless the comal in which the tortillas are made by brushing it with the leaves of the perul tree (probably *Schinus molle*, the Peruvian pepper tree).

The first step in the preparation of ceremonial tortillas is the nixtmalization of the corn. In this ancient process, the corn kernels are steeped in an alkaline solution which improves its taste, texture, and nutrition. The softened grains are then ground into a dough called masa.

While the corn soaks, the women prepare the dye used to print the images on the tortillas.



Muicle, also known as Mexican honeysuckle, firecracker bush, and Herb of the Virgin, is a medicinal plant that grows in meadows and home gardens throughout Central America and southern Mexico. Its botanical name is *Justicia spicigera*, and since it is popular in landscaping plantings here, you may even have one in your back yard.

In addition to its medicinal use in treating dysentery, “female hemorrhages”, and the bites of stinging insects, muicle provides a dye of a deep indigo color somewhere between purple, black and very dark blue.

To make the dye, the branches and leaves of muicle are roasted on the comal, and then boiled in water. Different colors can be obtained by adjusting the pH with lemon juice or bicarbonate of soda. The color can be altered further by the addition of cochineal, a white scale insect infecting the pads of the nopal cactus, that produces a beautiful red dye. Other colors are possible - chard, purslane and spinach create green, beets are used for red, Jamaica flowers produce purple, and Brazilwood yields pink.



In an awkward, yet charming, translation of one of the articles used for this article, the herbal infusion is “allowed to be serene for a whole night”.

Dye from the muicle is said to add a salty taste to the tortilla, and traditional cooks say that the darker the color, the greater must be the skill of the cook.



As the women decorate and cook the tortillas on the comal, an attitude of reverence fills the kitchen. Each step is performed with love and respect for the corn and gratitude for “its kindness towards the human being”.

The ancestors are said to be present to watch over the proceedings; according to the women, the rustling noises of the burning wood are the “murmurs of souls watching them cook”.



At least three women are needed for the process. One shapes the tortilla and places it on the comal. When one side is cooked, another woman removes it for decoration. Since she has already used a corncob to apply the dye to the wooden stamp, she now presses the tortilla onto the prepared stamp and transfers the image. As the “painted” tortilla is returned to the comal to finish cooking the additional heat intensifies and seals the design. The third woman then removes the tortilla from the comal and places it into a special basket.

Blessings are said and the first tortillas are given as offerings. In general, though, they are meant to be eaten - to provide sustenance to celebrants and at the same time remind them of their connection to the earth and to the heavens. ■





Happy Easter!

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The Herb Society of America
South Texas Unit
P.O. Box 6515
Houston, TX 77265-6515

Find our Unit on the web at:
www.herbsociety-stu.org

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