

Herbs Make Scents



THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA
VOLUME XLIV, NUMBER 12

SOUTH TEXAS UNIT
DECEMBER 2021

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Dec. 2021 Calendar

- Dec. 5, Sun. 10:00 am **STU Board Trip**, The Houston Botanic Garden (1 Botanic Lane, Houston, TX 77017). Save the date and watch for updates.
- Dec. 14, Tues. 10:00 am **Day meeting for members** at the home of **Donna Wheeler**. Lunch will be provided, please bring a Christmas dessert to share. Instead of a gift exchange, we will participate in **Toys for Tots!** If you would like to participate, please bring an unwrapped toy that doesn't require batteries. **RSVP to Donna** at 713-203-0249.
- Dec. 19, Sun. 7:00 pm **Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom gathering for Members Only)

Jan. 2022 Calendar

- Jan. 11, Tues. 10:00 am Save the date for the **Day Meeting**
- Jan. 19, Wed. 7:00 pm Save the date for the **Evening Meeting**
- Jan. 27, Thurs. 7:00 pm **Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom gathering for Members Only)
- Newsletter deadline: the 25th of every month is strictly enforced**
(Jan. editor is Linda Alderman)



*Happy
Birthday!*

12/31 Laura Boston

A tale as dramatic as the Greek novels, the character, Narcissus, rejected the advancements and proposals of marriages and eventually fell in love with his reflection. Did you know the word narcissist come from this fellow? Luckily this tale doesn't end as sadly; the Narcissus flower signifies rebirth. It will leave you guessing for more, since it can bloom anywhere from Winter to Spring, meaning you have to give it attention and watch over it constantly.

*May your
Days be
Merry and
Bright!*



Chairman's Corner

"The home gardener is part scientist, part artist, part philosopher, part plowman."

- John R. Whiting

As we wind down after a successful Herb Fair, I have been thinking about why I like the Herb Society. As I ponder why I even got myself into this, I keep coming back to the mind-boggling diversity of the herbal world. There is always something new to learn and share in the big, beautiful world of plants. No matter how long or hard I study herbs and their uses, the paucity of my knowledge continues to humble me, there is always something else to learn, some fresh take on something I didn't know or understand.

This very feeling of being somewhat incomplete or uneducated in the ways of herbs is when I know why I like the Herb Society. I don't have to know everything; there are hundreds, if not thousands of like-minded individuals in our group to share their particular skills. If we take the quote from John Whiting to heart, we know that there are many, many aspects of gardening that we, as individuals, don't have a handle on. For me, I am more artist than scientist, drawn to the philosophy and spirituality of nature and gardening more than being the ploughman.

Thank god we have the science lovers in our group to talk about the chemistry of herbs and why they work. Thank god we have artists in our group that can use herbs in creative ways in cooking, fabric dyeing, and medicine. Thank god, we have the philosophers and sages in our group that give us those deep dives into research. And as I get older, thank god for those of us strong enough to still be the ploughmen (or women!) needed to make it all happen in the first place.

We are a diverse group of individuals with unique skills and points of view to offer. By sharing with each other and others outside the group, we all are better off. This is in fact, our mission statement. After the holidays, we will be working on reaching out to fellow gardeners by reviving the Speaker's Bureau.

My challenge to all of you over the holidays is, in addition to enjoying the sights and sounds of the season, to take time to learn something new about herbs and be ready to share it somehow.

I hope you can find the joy of herbs in this season of magic and delight.

Julie Fordes
Unit Chair

Herbs and Spices of the Holidays



Rosemary: used in holiday décor and cooking

Parsley: garnish for meals and used in gravy & turkey stock

Sage: pairs well with poultry

Thyme: used in decorating & flavoring gravy and side dishes

Peppermint: candy canes, cocktails or used in a diffuser

Cinnamon: baking cinnamon buns, sticks used in crafting

Nutmeg: dusting the top of egg nog

Star Anise: used in crafts, have you tried it in turkey gravy?

Cloves: orange pomanders & holiday herb and spice blends

Ginger: gingerbread houses and cookies

Lavender: dried flowers used in potpourri and crafts



Membership Tips: Earning Your Hours – Major Events

Carolyn Kosclskey, Membership Chair

The 48th Annual Herb Fair on Saturday, November 6 provided members the first opportunity of the year to meet membership requirements of participating in the preparation and being on-site the day of the event. In the recently published 2021-2022 Directory (violet) the last page (28) should be used to record your time. Be sure to record your hours in whole and half hour increments (1½ hour = 1.5 hour). Please mark November 5 hours with an asterisk (*) to show you assisted in preparation, and mark November 6 hours with two asterisk (**) to show you participated on-site. After the holidays a list of those attending Herb Fair on November 5 and 6 will be distributed for verification. Note: Actual hours from July 1, 2021 should be recorded on page 28 including for Herb Fair. If more space is needed please use a straight edge to insert extra lines between the printed one, or include a sheet of your choice with columns marked. Next summer members will be asked to total and submit annual hours earned.

2021-2022 Directory (violet)

The new 2021-2022 Directory (violet) has been published and was distributed to members attending the Herb Fair on November 5 – 6. If you are a paid-up member and were not in attendance at this event, Directories will be passed out at future meetings and mailed to those with zip codes outside the metropolitan Houston area.

BOOK

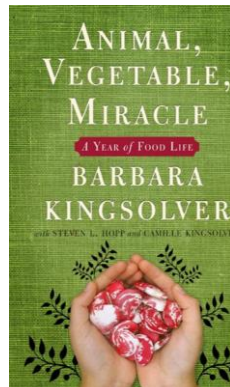
C O R N E R

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



Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (2007) is a non-fiction book by **Barbara Kingsolver** detailing her family's attempt to eat only locally grown food for an entire year.



Herb of the Month: Cloves

Angela Roth

Latin: *Syzygium aromaticum*

Requires hot and wet growing conditions, 50-70 inches of rainfall, annually

Lives up to 100 years.

(I have grown allspice for years until a freeze caught it in 2017. I bought that tree from Caldwell's Nursery—if anyone can get it, my bet is on Caldwell's!!)

In folklore, people were required to chew two cloves prior to meeting with a Chinese Emperor. Also, in the Spice Islands, parents planted a clove tree to celebrate the birth of a child.

My first exposure to cloves was at Christmas. My precious mother, God rest her soul, used them to tack rings of pineapple onto an entire ham. The aroma filled the entire house and was amazing! I plan to use cloves for my Christmas dinner this year, both to honor her and inspire my own family! I have also chewed Clove Gum back in the 60's. It was such a neat scent. First manufactured by the Thomas Adams Company in 1914, the clove plant supposedly increased its popularity during Prohibition due to its ability to cover the smell of alcohol. On the other hand, Germans use cloves to spice wine in many recipes for Glühwein, the hot mulled wine that makes you buy loads of ornaments at their Christmas Markets! (Personal experience, here.)

Just like cinnamon black pepper and other warm spices, people have fought for control over the lands that produce these spices. Think how boring food would be without all the ingredients that come from our warmer climate countries. Indians have long studied the benefits of herbs and spices. Cloves are used in Ayurveda, an alternative medicine system, for toothaches and nausea. They are also suggested to be an aphrodisiac. The University of Texas reports that cloves contain biochemicals that have been reported to possess antioxidant, hepatoprotective, anti-microbial and anti-inflammatory properties.

Headaches may be reduced by using cloves. You can look up loads more information on how to prepare that recipe, but it could just be that the lovely memories triggered by this spice are enough to lift anyone's spirits!

Go ahead, at least stick some cloves in an orange and hang it on your tree!!



Syzygium Tree

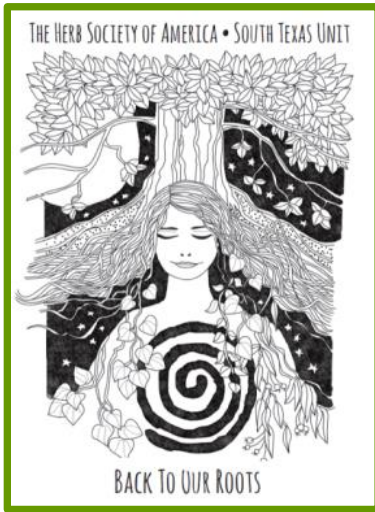


Growing Cloves



Clove Bud

Photos from: [syzygium aromaticum - Bing](#)



BACK TO OUR ROOTS

Julie Fordes

The tea blends all sold out at Herb Fair!!! It was wonderful to know that making teas with our homegrown, organic herbs makes a difference to the bottom line. What a great confirmation of our efforts to get "back to our roots".

Going forward, we traditionally have a luncheon and educational symposium for the public with top-notch speakers at Herb Day in the spring. We always like to have lots to sell at the spring event because all the proceeds from product and craft sales go directly to the Madalene Hill Scholarship Fund. I want to have plenty of herbs on hand to make tea with.

In addition to our home gardens, we are now able to grow herbs at the Westbury Community Garden bed for our use in exchange for herbal education for the WCG community. It's time to get that bed in order! There are holy basil plants to harvest and dry. The soil needs to be amended and readied for planting cool weather herbs (chamomile and calendula) needed for teas and other products. If you would like to start seeds for the cool weather herbs, I have a couple of varieties each of chamomile and calendula.

Westbury Community Garden Three Days to Volunteer

Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Dec. 9	Dec. 10	Dec. 11

10 am - 1 pm each day

There is a lot of work to do.... Come just one day, or all three! Come for part of the day or stay the whole time. When you come, bring your favorite tools and a mug for tea. Bring a friend to help!!! The more the merrier!!! Be prepared to take home some holy basil to dry.



Special thanks to the South Texas Herb Society members that helped make the **48th Annual South Texas Unit Herb Fair** a great success! We are especially grateful to all those who chaired and/or served on committees as we prepared for the event. We appreciate your time and talents! Many hours were spent organizing, emailing, making phone calls, shopping, updating forms, ordering herbs, and crafting. Thanks to all who participated. We also want to acknowledge members who shared their expertise in herb knowledge, publicity, and financial management. We are grateful to members who shared gifts from their gardens and to every member who helped with set-up the day before Herb Fair and volunteered during the event. Your hard work and creative ideas made for an amazing day!

We also want to thank everyone that attended the Fair. If it was your first time, we hope you enjoyed yourself and if returning we were pleased to have you back, we loved hosting you and sharing our love of herbs. Whether you enjoyed constructing herb smoke bundles, exploring the crafts, teas, jellies, honey, baked goods or learning about herbs, we appreciate your support and are glad that you came. The hard work of members, community participation, our new location, Southside Place Clubhouse, and the weather made for a wonderful Herb Fair!

With gratitude,
Donna Wheeler
Herb Fair Chair



Bay leaf balls for closets or decoration



Making dried herb smoke bundles at the education table



**Outside areas expand display space
Homemade herbal baked goods shown**



AT-HOME RECIPES



AT-HOME RECIPES

December 2021
Carolyn Kosclskey

Zingiber officinale is a tuberous rhizome in the same family that includes cardamom and turmeric. Is it considered an herb or a spice? Because of its botanical nature plant experts consider plant roots used medicinally or culinarily as spices. This beautiful and fragrant flowering perennial can be grown indoors as a houseplant, or in the landscape. Ginger requires moist, fertile, well-drained soil, and a shady area in USDA climate zones 9 through 12.

“Do not eat too much. Do not talk at meals. Do not take away the ginger.”
— Confucius, 551 to 479 BCE

Anthropologists have found remnants of ginger root in India dating back 5000 years, before the written word and recorded history of man. The first record of cultivated *Zingiber officinale* was in ancient China where it was commonly used as a medical treatment for nausea and digestive issues. The first known recipe for gingerbread made from the root was from the ancient Greeks and Egyptians in 2400 BCE. In Sanskrit the humble root was known as *srigavera*, which translates to “root shaped like a horn.” During the 10th century recipes developed by the Chinese spread to Europe via the Silk Road. Crusaders brought back ginger for cooks of aristocrats in the 11th century.

Had I but a penny in the world, thou shouldst have it for gingerbread
— William Shakespeare, 1554 to 1616 CE

Queen Elizabeth I in the mid 1500s is credited with the idea of gilding the hard gingerbread cookies, more like honey ginger candy, made in the likeness of animals, kings, queens and visiting dignitaries. Shaped gingerbread cookies soon became a staple at medieval fairs in England, France, Holland and Germany. The festivals over time became known as Gingerbread Fairs, and the cookies served were known as “fairings.” The shapes of the cookies changed with the season with flowers in the spring and birds in the fall. Elaborately decorated gingerbread became synonymous with things fancy and elegant in England. The gold leaf often used to decorate the gingerbread cookies led to the popular expression “to take the gilt off the gingerbread.” Gingerbread recipes spread across Europe and were known by many different names across the continent: *Lebkuchen* (Germany), *pepperkaker* (Norway), *pepparkakor* (Sweden), *brunkager* (Denmark), *peperkoek* (Netherlands), *biber* (Switzerland), *pierniki* (Poland), *Тульский пряник* (Russia) and too many more to list. A common medieval gingerbread recipe might include a cup of honey seasoned with ginger, cinnamon and cloves, mixed with 1 ³/₄ cup dry breadcrumbs, patted into a pan and baked as a sheet then sliced. In the 16th century English cooks replaced the breadcrumbs with flour along with eggs and sweetener resulting in softer and more palatable “ginger bread.”



"Gyngerbrede.--Take a quart of hony, & sethe it,& skeme it clene; take Safroun, pouder Pepir, & throw ther-on; take grayted Bred, & make it so chargeaunt that it wol be y-lechyd; then take pouder Canelle, & straw ther-on y-now; then make yt square, lyke as thou wolt leche yt; take when thou lechyst hyt, an caste Box leves a-bouyn, y-stykyd ther-on, on clowys. And if thou wolt haue it Red, coloure it with Saunderys y-now."

The cackier version of gingerbread more common in America was brought over by German immigrants in the early 1700s. George Washington's mother, Mary Ball Washington, served her recipe for gingerbread, a soft cake or loaf, to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1781 when he stopped to pay his respects at her home in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The recipe became known as "Gingerbread Lafayette" and was passed down through the Washington and Curtis families. <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/online-activities-for-kids-2/how-to-make-lafayette-gingerbread/>

Houston had its claim to gingerbread fame also. Some of you living here in the sixties, when the oil and gas city was much smaller and money looser, may remember the Bank of the Southwest on Travis Street in the downtown area celebrating the holidays with their traditional December "open house" for all citizens to enjoy, held in their spacious and lavish lobby.

Beginning in 1963, it was a tradition in our home to take a family trip downtown during the Christmas season to see the stores and businesses decorated for Christmas. Our favorite part of the trip was to stroll through the Bank of the Southwest where the lobby was transformed into a Dickens themed Christmas setting. Bank employees were dressed in Victorian era clothes and there were various holiday themed displays set up for viewing. As you exited the bank, everyone was treated to Wassail and Gingerbread, which quickly became a favorite holiday treat for our family. From Linda Parker, Mendenhall and Swan Family. <https://www.familycookbookproject.com/recipe/2692061/gingerbread-men.html>

Bank of the Southwest Gingerbread

From a recipe clipped from the Houston Chronicle in the late sixties

½ cup shortening	½ teaspoon baking soda
½ cup sugar (granulated or brown, firmly packed)	½ teaspoon salt
1 egg	½ teaspoon ginger
½ cup molasses (light or dark)	½ teaspoon cinnamon
1 ½ teaspoons vinegar	½ teaspoon allspice
3 cups sifted all-purpose flour	¼ teaspoon ground cloves

Cream shortening and sugar. Add egg and beat well. Add molasses and vinegar. Sift together flour, soda, salt, ginger, cinnamon, allspice and cloves. Stir in sifted ingredients, mixing only until blended. Chill dough, then roll out on lightly floured board ½-inch thick. Cut with gingerbread man cookie cutter. Place on greased cookie sheets. Use raisins to form features and buttons. Bake at 350 degrees 10-12 minutes. Remove at once and cool. Frost if desired. Makes 2-3 dozen, depending on cutter size.



Bank of the Southwest Wassail

From a recipe clipped from the Houston Chronicle in the late sixties

2 quarts sweet apple cider	1 stick whole cinnamon
2 cups orange juice	1 teaspoon whole cloves
1 cup lemon juice	1 cup sugar or honey to taste
5 cups pineapple juice (two No. 2 cans)	

Combine ingredients and bring to a simmer. Strain and serve hot. Makes about 32 4-oz. servings

See also: <https://www.chron.com/life/food/article/A-glass-of-good-cheer-1721808.php>

A little something to enjoy with your family and friends during the holidays

<https://mathcraft.wonderhowto.com/how-to/make-6-sided-kirigami-snowflakes-0131796/>

LONGER DAYS / SHORTER NIGHTS BEGINNING SOON

Tuesday, December 21st is the winter solstice; shortest day in the northern hemisphere, with only 10 hours and 14 minutes of daylight in the Houston area with the sun setting at 5:26 pm. Below is a link to a hands-on after-dinner activity for your family to enjoy together on that evening, while listening to NPR's recording of John Henry Faulk's Christmas Story, read in his own voice in 1974. Happy New Year to all.

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5028755>

<https://mathcraft.wonderhowto.com/how-to/make-6-sided-kirigami-snowflakes-0131796/>

LOOKING FORWARD INTO THE NEW YEAR

Reflecting back as we enter our third calendar year with the pandemic, there are home trends that begin in 2020 and are continuing into the new year: preparing more meals for family at home, dining outdoors at home, mindfulness of choices and preparation of our food, awareness of our health and importance of a healthy home and products we use in our home, online grocery ordering, working from home and home schooling, take-out orders replacing dining-out options along with vaccination checks, to name a few. At-home food trends projected are more popcorn to go with our in-home movie streaming, more non-alcoholic drink choices as awareness of alcohol intake, environmentally friendly food with an increased interest in meatless and plant based products, fresh herbs, home garden produce and farmers market offerings, and continued interest in bright and earthy Filipino flavors.

For the January at-home recipe section you're invited to send not only plant-based recipes, but recipes for chemical-free home cleaning products, i.e. glass cleaners, detergents, etc. You don't have to be a member of STU to respond, all submittals are welcome to therecipelady@gmail.com.



A Christmas Quiz

On The History and Lore of Orange and Clove Pomanders



These Old-Fashioned Christmas Decorations

- a. Once contained whale vomit and precious spices
- b. Were status symbols of the rich and powerful
- c. Were a fashion accessory that brought good luck
- d. Were believed to ward off plague and other diseases
- e. All of the above

Karen Cottingham

Have you ever wondered where the Christmas tradition of covering oranges with cloves came from? Make yourself comfortable with a sugar cookie and a hot cup of herbal tea - it's a good story for a long winter's night...

It's the story of how exquisite medieval jewels once thought to have magical powers, such as the gilded silver pomander (pictured below) made by an unknown German goldsmith, evolved into the fragrant oranges pierced by cloves that we associate with Christmas. How did powerful amulets once suspended from golden chains and strings of pearls and rubies come to be connected with strings of cranberries and boughs of evergreen on the mantle? Why are the intricately festooned and bejeweled masterpieces of

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gold and silver and the ordinary fruit studded with cloves both called “pomanders”? What do they have to do with plague and whale vomit?

Read on...



In the Middle Ages it was universally believed that strong-scented substances had the power to disinfect the air and ward off plague and other diseases. Images: Gilded silver pomander, c. 1501-1515, Museum für Angewandte Kunst and Flickr, image posted by Giveawayboy, 2007

Our word “pomander” harkens back to the thirteenth century, when the *term* “*pomme d’ambre*” was introduced into the Old French language.

“*Pomme*” was the Latin word from antiquity for “apple or fruit”, exemplified by the name “Pomona” for the Roman goddess of fruit trees and their culture. “*Pomme*” was also a popular term used to describe round objects. And “*ambre*” was an Old French modification of the Arabic word “*anbar*”, meaning “ambergris”, a sweet-smelling secretion of sperm-whale intestines that was used as a fixative for perfumes.

So a “*pomme d’ambre*” could be thought of as an “apple” or “ball” of ambergris, or more accurately, a ball of ambergris combined with other materials to make a sweet-scented waxy perfume.

By the fifteenth century, several waves of deadly plague led to these perfume balls acquiring both medicinal and magical attributes. A “*pomme d’ambre*” became a “mix of aromatic herbs in a bag or perforated apple-shaped shell, carried or worn around the neck as a preservative against infection.” The fragrant pomander was made by melting and combining ambergris with aromatic resins and then finely ground spices. Musk was added to this warm mixture, or kneaded in later. As it cooled, the warm concoction would have been rolled into an “apple ball” in one’s hand, and then rolled again in additional finely ground resin or spices.

Containers for the “apple balls” usually consisted of two hemispheres, frequently in the shape of fruits, joined by a hinge at the “equator”. Eventually, the intricate and costly receptacles also came to be known



as “*pommes d’ambre*”, and then later, “pomanders”, as the belief in the protective power of perfume against plague spread to England. In Germany, both the open-work ornaments and their scented contents were called “*Muskapfel*”, or “musk apples”. They were worn dangling from a girdle or attached to a chain and worn around the neck - but only by the wealthy, as both musk and ambergris were worth at least twice their weight in gold.

The history of pomanders, both the containers and their contents, is intricately connected with the history of religion, perfumes, and plagues. Perfumery, so integral to the religious practices and personal hygiene of antiquity, almost disappeared in the Western world from the 5th to the 11th century. As Christianity became the dominant religion, the use of incense and perfume were both strongly condemned as pagan practices. Incense was only gradually introduced into Christian religious celebrations after centuries of disuse.

The art of perfumery, meanwhile, achieved great sophistication and nuance in the Islamic world. During the Crusades, conducted between 1100 and 1290, Europeans were suddenly exposed to unimaginably exotic aromas - seeds and bark such as nutmeg, cinnamon, pepper, and cloves; aromatic woods like camphor and sandalwood; the fragrant resins of myrrh and frankincense, and intensely scented animal products such as ambergris, musk, and civet.



Illustrated map, (1380), depicting the journey of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo (1254-1324) along the silk road to China

In addition to the fragrant materials themselves, Westerners were introduced to new ideas about their medicinal value and the benefits of personal hygiene.

Pomanders may have been introduced into European society by **King Baldwin IV** of Jerusalem, who, in 1174, sent “golden apples filled with musk” to **Emperor Frederick Barbarossa**. Whether this was intended for medicinal purposes, to freshen the air of the Emperor’s chambers, as a devotional aid, or as an aphrodisiac has been lost to history!

The earliest known pomanders were reserved for the use of nobility and clergy. Five, for example, are mentioned in the inventory of **Pope Boniface VIII** in 1295.

These delicate, perforated “cages” of precious metals and gems and their equally valuable contents took on great medical and religious importance in 1346, when twelve ships sailed into the Sicilian port of Messina from the Black Sea, and the Black Death - bubonic plague - entered Europe. Over the next five years, plague would kill more than 20 million people in Europe - almost one-third of the continent’s population.



Since the time of Hippocrates, Thucydides, and Galen, all of whom lived through plagues of their own times, disease was believed to be due to the influence of pestilential or “bad air”. The medieval writers of “Plague Tractates” describe in detail how air becomes corrupted (decaying organic matter; “exhalations” from swamps, marshes, and stagnant water; earthquakes releasing poisonous gasses trapped inside the earth; misalignment of the planets; and/or divine wrath). And if breathing “corrupted air” is the cause of disease, then the solution is to surround oneself in a shield of pleasant fragrance.

Here is “A Prescription Against the Corrupt Air of the Plague”, suggested in **Master Jacme d’ Agramont’s Regiment de preservació de la pestilència**, written in Catalan in 1348:

The regimen to be observed against pestilential air, in seven parts, the first of which concerns the rectification of rotten and corrupt air... Great lords can benefit from a perfume made of the following ingredients: lignon aloes and ambergris (two drams each); the best select myrrh and pure frankincense (1 oz.), camphor, storax (1 oz.), dried rose petals (2 drams), “Makassarene” sandalwood and leaves or myrtle (1 oz.). Pulverize these more or less together with resin or rosewater of Damascus in which camphor has been dissolved. These can be made into pills or troches.

The 1348 report of the Medical Faculty of the University of Paris similarly states: “The present epidemic or pest comes directly from air corrupted in its substance”. As a remedy, the writers recommend the use of incense and fragrance, which “hampers putrefaction of the air, and removes the stench of the air and the corruption [caused by] the stench.” Nutmeg, aloe wood, ginger, cloves, cinnamon, camphor, sandalwood, and cinnamon were approved for use in pomanders.

Of course, only the extremely wealthy and powerful had access to “golden apples” of exotic fragrance. The remedy quoted above is specified to be for “great lords”. And a “great lord” would want his plague medicine to be administered in a receptacle worthy of his status. Several gold or silver pomanders, some encrusted with pearls or precious stones, were documented in the inventories of royalty and the nobility from the 14th century.



Pomander from 1350, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England

This ornate silver and niello pomander was produced in Italy around 1350. The loop at the top of the pomander was used to attach it to a chain, so it could be worn around the neck. The four sections that make up the sphere are held together by a pin and screw. When these are removed, the object opens up to show the gold column in the middle surrounded by four, quarter-round sections off each side. Each of the four segments could contain a different substance meant to fragrance the foul-smelling air and protect the wearer from disease.

Poorer people used simpler pomanders that included common herbs, sometimes mixed with soil, and placed in cloth bags. Because lower classes could not afford fancy pomanders or other types of medical treatment, they were believed to be the ones who spread the disease.



A fine pomander could also be incorporated into, or attached to, paternosters. **Marie de France**, in 1377, possessed a paternoster of gold beads "filled with amber" and her father, **Charles V**, in 1380, had certain beads "full of musk".

Many people believed that the Black Death was a kind of divine punishment - retribution for sins against God such as greed, blasphemy, heresy, fornication and worldliness. As pointed out by **Tiffin Fairaway**, pomanders incorporated into rosaries, as illustrated below, would combine the essential elements of prayer and devotion with beneficial healing substances.

One might also add superstition and magic to the elements incorporated into the medieval pomander, as the boundary between magic and medicine, science and alchemy, and religion and superstition was very blurred. The rosary beads in the Flemish portrait below appear to be coral, which was believed to protect against witchcraft and evil, and would have magnified the protective powers of the devotional object itself.



Detail from Portrait of a Woman Holding a Pomander on a Beaded Cord by **Barthel Bruyn the Elder** c. 1547

Elements of magic, alchemy, astronomy, and the occult were clearly intertwined within the medieval concept of illness. Even the most scholarly and practical physicians and surgeons believed that supernatural forces caused at least some of the ailments they encountered. And according to medieval logic, supernatural diseases required supernatural healing. Magic, medicine, and religion overlapped as herbs, chemicals, and precious stones, animal products, and holy objects were endowed with magical healing powers.

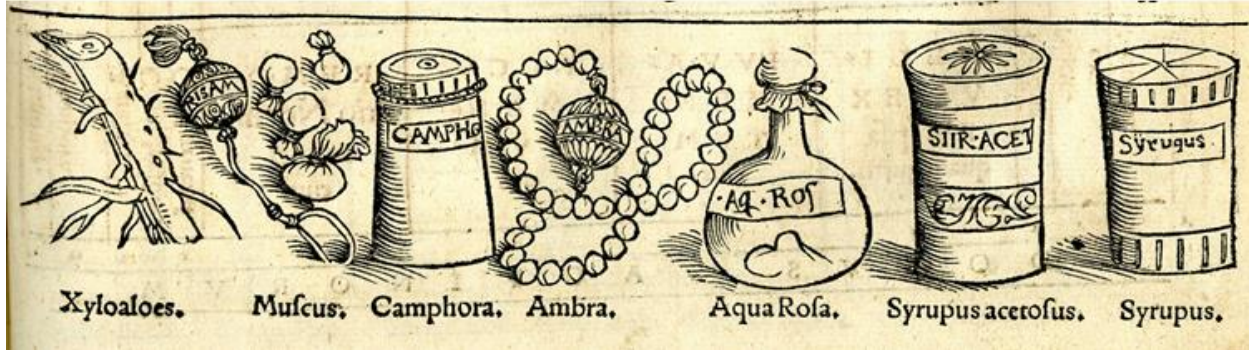
Powdered coral, along with other unusual materials, even found its way into the anti-plague recipes devised by alchemists. The following recipe, meant to protect against plague and venereal disease, was written by the German alchemist **Oswald Croll** (c.1563 - 1609):

"two ounces of toads dried in the air and sun and reduced to powder, 'the menstruum of young girls: as much as you can get, crystals of white arsenic, an ounce and a half of red arsenic, three drams of root of dittany or an equal amount of tormentil, one dram of unpierced pearls, one dram of coral, one dram each of Eastern sapphire and Eastern emerald, two scruples of Eastern saffron.'... Everything must be then reduced to a fine powder, mixed together, and added to 'gum tragacanth' dissolved in rose-water to make a paste. When the Sun and Moon are in Scorpio, or when the Moon is new, the paste should be fashioned around an amulet... hanging around the neck by a silk cord or in the region of the heart" (Peter Marshall, *The Magic Circle of Rudolf II*, pp. 130-131)

Pomanders, as receptacles for magical substances, came to be viewed as powerful amulets themselves, especially when combined with devotional objects or other amulets, inscribed with magical words, or encrusted with precious gemstones with supernatural powers.



An amulet-pomander such as the one labelled “Ambra” in the woodcut below not only protected against disease, including plague, but also witchcraft, evil enchantments, and complications of childbirth. In A Large Dictionary, published in 1677, the pomander was officially defined as “a preservative against some evil.” The mere wearing of a pomander on the body, or its presence in the hand, was thought to guard the wearer and those in proximity against evil and disease. A pomander could also be used as a love charm.



Woodcut of pharmaceutical containers and products from [Tacuini Sanitatis](#) (1531) by Elluchasem Elimithar

Faith in the preventative pomander was such that the elite and wealthy who could afford them were never without them. Even their portraits show them with pomander in hand, as these intricate amulets became the symbol of an age defined by infection.



Portrait of a Man by **Jacob Cornelisz Van Oostanen** (1518), left, and Portrait of **Lucrezia de' Medici** by **Agnolo Bronzino** (c.1560), both holding pomanders

Another symbol of the age of infection and superstition was **Nostradamus**, born **Michel de Nostredame** (1503-1566). Known primarily as a prophet today, during his own lifetime, Nostradamus was renowned as an astrologist, herbalist, apothecary, and physician advisor to **Catherine de' Medici**, the wife of **King Henry II** of France. At the age of fourteen, he enrolled in the University of Avignon to study medicine, but his education was interrupted by an outbreak of the bubonic plague. He worked as an apothecary for several years before entering the University of Montpellier, one of the finest medical schools of the Middle Ages. He was almost immediately expelled, though, after his work as an apothecary, a manual trade forbidden by university statutes, was discovered.



For several years, Nostradamus travelled through Italy and France helping victims of the plague. He approached the epidemic in a remarkably enlightened manner for the time, encouraging hygiene, fresh air, and the removal of infected corpses from populated areas. He married and had 2 children; however, in 1534, his wife and children died of the plague. While he continued to treat plague victims, he also turned to the occult, making prophesies and calculating the astrological charts of the wealthy. Although charged with heresy by the Church, he became the personal astrologer of the royal family. Catherine de' Medici appointed Nostradamus Counselor and Physician-in-Ordinary to the court of King Henry II.

In 1552, Nostradamus published instructions for making pomander lozenges or aromatic balls. The ingredients include Labdanum gum "as obtained from goat's beards and sheep's bellies in the fortunate lands of Arabia," gum storax, benzoin, rose troches, violet root powder (orris root), musk, amber (Ambergris) and rose petals. This recipe produced "an aromatic ball of the most sublime and long-lasting scent that could be made anywhere in the world."



The Portrait of Michel de Nostredame (Nostradamus) by his son **César de Nostredame (1553-1630?)**

This protective "aromatic ball" of Nostradamus may well be filling the jewel-encrusted pomander in the hand of Lucrezia de' Medici (above), the grand-niece of the seer's patron, Catherine de' Medici. Keeping the pomander close at hand was important because handling it warmed the resins, musk and spices, which helped release its fragrance.



A parcel-gilt silver pomander, made in Italy in the 16th century, features a niello inscription; *Edward Prince of Wales later King Edward VI* by **Hans Holbein the Younger**. 1539



Meanwhile, during the reign of **Henry VIII** (1509-1547) in England, bubonic plague was just one of the deadly infections sweeping through the country. Waves of smallpox, measles, and the mysterious, and as yet unidentified, “sweating sickness” took the lives of many. **Anne Boleyn**, Henry's second wife, survived it, but his chief minister, **Thomas Cromwell**, lost both his wife and two daughters to the illness. Henry's third wife, **Jane Seymour**, was never coronated as queen due to the 1536-1537 outbreak of bubonic plague in London. Jane died after giving birth to **Edward Prince of Wales**, whose portrait above by **Hans Holbein** shows the royal infant clutching a protective pomander.

Catherine of Aragon, first wife of Henry VIII, wore a perforated pomander filled with imported spices like sandalwood, clove and cinnamon, and Henry himself owned at least sixteen pomanders, all very precious and meticulously carved.



Pomander, English, c. 1580, silver gilt

Some of the pomanders of this era were designed with hinged compartments, each containing a different exotic spice or powerful substance, and often with its identity engraved on the hinged section. These compartments, varying in number from four to as many as sixteen, are formed like the segments of an orange. They are hinged below and united at the top by a screw or pin, which when removed, allows the segments to open out.

This pomander has 8 hinged compartments engraved with the name of perfume it held: ROSE, CEDRO, GESMINI, AMBRA, MOSCHETE, VIOLE, NARANSI, & GAROFOLI.

The central container is capped by a grotesque figure, which may have provided additional protection against evil.

In the days of mysterious and unpredictable epidemics, an actual orange was also considered a safeguard against infection. **George Cavendish**, in 1557, gives a wonderful contemporary description of **Cardinal Wolsey (1475 - 1530), Archbishop of York, and Chancellor to Henry VIII**, using a hollowed orange rind filled with a sponge soaked in vinegar “and other confections against the pestilent airs; to which he most commonly smelt unto, passing among the press, or else when he was pestered with many suitors.”

At the Tudor court, however, the King himself preferred the *pouncet* box, a flattened sphere of gold or gilded silver with a pierced lid which contained a sponge soaked in aromatic vinegar. It was usually hung from the waist with a silk cord or gold chain and was an essential part of the *ensemble* of the well-dressed gentleman. Worn around the neck or hung from a waist belt, it made an important statement of refined taste, wealth, and fashion.

During the reign of **Elizabeth I**, inhaling the sharp fragrance from the pouncet box became as ritualized a social grace as the taking of snuff some centuries later. The Queen herself, though, favored traditional pomanders - held in the hand, worn round the neck, or hung from a girdle.

Elizabeth's pomanders were made of gold or silver and encrusted with gems and pearls. Many were highly decorated like the 16th century enamel and pearl pomander pictured below:



Enamel and pearl pomander, 16th century, Victoria and Albert Museum, Portrait of Queen Elizabeth c. 1570, artist unknown, holding a jeweled pomander, and a nugget of ambergris, a rare and expensive substance sometimes called the *treasure of the sea* or *floating gold*

Although occasional outbreaks of plague continued to occur during Elizabeth's rule, by the seventeenth century, the now 600-year-old pomander had become an object of derision. The heady musk and ambergris contents, considered overbearing and unbecoming, were replaced with vinegar-based aromatics instead.

A slightly different recommendation for prevention of plague came from **Thomas Cogan** (c. 1545 - 1607), a Tudor era physician and clergyman. According to Dr. Cogan, one should carry in his mouth a clove or two, a piece of cinnamon, an orange peel, or a piece of angelica root; and carry in the hand, an orange, a sprig of mint, or a sponge drenched in vinegar.

Where did Cardinal Wolsey and Dr. Cogan find oranges so far from their native lands of China and Southeast Asia?

The Khalifs of Cordoba had conquered southern Spain around 711 AD, and completed building their mosque and surrounding courtyard of sour orange trees at Al-Andaluz in 987. So presumably, a hollowed orange rind such as that used by the Cardinal would have been possible to acquire, either from Spain, or imported at great cost along with other spices from the Orient.

The first record of actual orange trees in England was at Beddington House in Surrey. Toward the end of the sixteenth century **Sir Francis Carew** somehow obtained saplings, possibly from Paris, and grew them outdoors. Initially they were protected over the winter by temporary covers, but soon, permanent buildings with large, south-facing windows were constructed especially for the citrus trees. Planted in movable tubs, the orange trees were protected from cold during the winter, and were placed outdoors in the garden when the weather improved.

When presents were exchanged at New Year's, an orange, sometimes stuck with cloves, was a coveted gift. **Ben Jonson** (1572-1637), a popular Jacobean-era playwright, mentioned this custom in his Christmas Masque, which was performed at the English royal court in 1616. A character named Gambol laments the lack of a clove for his orange: "And here's New-Year's-Gift has an orange and rosemary, but not a clove to stick in't." It may be that cloves served as a sort of preservative for the expensive oranges.



John Evelyn (1620-1706), pictured below with a cloved orange, was an immensely wealthy English country gentleman, the author of some 30 books on the fine arts, forestry, and religious topics, and the noted diarist. At first I thought that the orange that he held was a sort of plague pomander similar to Cardinal Wolsey's, but Evelyn was actually engaged in the introduction of orange trees into England and the engineering and construction of the glasshouses needed for their survival.



John Evelyn (1620–1706) by **Adriaen Hanneman** (follower of) (1650, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust) and Frontispiece from **J.R. Pearson's** *Hints on the Construction and Management of Orchard-Houses* (2nd ed., 1862)

As the proficiency of growing citrus in England improved, oranges became a desirable, delicious, and generous treat in the middle of winter. By the 1700s the word “pomander” had evolved to take on a more humble meaning, the clove-studded fruits we know today.

It's easy to see how the orange became featured in Christmastime traditions. At the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, when the custom of gift giving for Christmas was generally adopted, the orange was a rare and expensive fruit suitable for a present. And oranges symbolize abundance, fertility and prosperity - all excellent associations for the New Year.

There may even be a connection to the original **Saint Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra**, (270-343).

In the altarpiece painting below, St. Nicholas is shown throwing three balls of gold through a window, thus providing the dowry for three poverty-stricken maidens and saving them from slavery. In some versions of the story, one of the gold balls landed in a stocking that was drying by the fire. To commemorate this miracle, it became customary for Christmas gifts to be left for children in either their shoes or their stockings hung by the fireplace.

With the publication of the classic poem “The Night Before Christmas” in 1823, the practice of filling stockings with oranges became firmly embedded in Christmas gift-giving traditions. Today, children still awaken to find an orange in their stocking on Christmas morning and some may even wonder why.



Families decorating their homes with fragrant clove-studded oranges might associate the tradition with the Victorians, but probably not with the plague, perfume, and magic!

Now *you* know the history and can share it this Christmas!



Orange pomanders and **Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra**, in an altarpiece painted between 1433 and 1435 for a monastery in Florence

If you'd like to create your own clove-orange pomanders, I can recommend the following websites:

<https://theherbalacademy.com/clove-pomanders-old-fashion-holiday-favorite/>

<https://www.almanac.com/content/how-make-pomander-balls>

And for those striving for authenticity, you can recreate a medieval pomander (or just read about it!) here:

<https://thornandthread.wordpress.com/2021/03/10/pomanders-of-what-and-how-they-are-made/>

Of course, you'll need some snacks to enjoy while you're making your pomanders:

Orange and Clove Pomander Cookies <https://www.nutritionyoucantrust.com/orange-clove-snowballs/>

Pomander Orange Cake <https://bakingbites.com/2019/12/pomander-orange-ca>

And have a lovely, old-fashioned Christmas!

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