

# Herbs Make Scents

THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA  
VOLUME XLV, NUMBER 6



SOUTH TEXAS UNIT  
JUNE 2022

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

## June 2022 Calendar

June 9, Thurs. 6:30 pm  
**Note: Day of Week & Time Change**

**Westbury Garden Workday** at 12581 Dunlap Street, Houston, TX 77035

June 14, Tues. 10:00 am

**Day Meeting** is cancelled.

June 14, Tues. 7:00 pm

**Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom Gathering for Members Only)

June 15, Wed. 7:00 pm

**HSA-STU Annual Members Meeting** on Zoom

June 16, Thurs. 6:30 pm

**Westbury Garden Workday** at 12581 Dunlap Street, Houston, TX 77035

June 21, Tues. 6:30 pm

**June Lagniappe - Something Extra "Herbs for the Summer Solstice"** at the **Westbury Garden Pavilion** 12581 Dunlap Street 77035

June 25, Sat. 10:30 am - 12:30 pm

**June Lagniappe - Something Extra "The Comfort of Chai - Warm, Spicy, and Healing"** at the home of **Elizabeth Grandich**. Customize your own chai tea blend with Ayurvedic practitioner **Asal Shokati** and enjoy some traditional snacks from **Pondicheri Bake Lab + Shop**

## July 2022 Calendar

July 7, Thurs 6:30 pm

**Westbury Garden Workday** at 12581 Dunlap Street, Houston, TX 77035

July 12, Tues. 10:00 am

**Day Meeting** Lunch out, Details: TBA

July 13, Wed. 7:00 pm

**Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom Gathering for Members Only)

July 20, Wed. 7:00 pm

**July Lagniappe - Something Extra Evening Meeting** presented on Zoom. Two of the featured speakers at the HSA Annual Meeting in Charleston - botanist, forager, musician, and filmmaker **Celie Dailey**, and anthropologist **Faith Mitchell**, the author of "Hoodoo Medicine", will combine their expertise about the Gullah culture of the Low Country and their herbal medicines.

July 21, Thurs. 6:30 pm

**Westbury Garden Workday** at 12581 Dunlap Street, Houston, TX 77035

**Newsletter deadline: the 25<sup>th</sup> of every month is strictly enforced (July Editor is Linda Alderman)**



## Happy Birthday!

6/11 - Sara Díaz

6/22 - Tamara Gruber

6/26 - Mary Sacilowski

Herbs for  
Gemini  
Parsley, Dill, Anise,  
Lavender &  
Marjoram



## Chairman's Corner

Greetings,

I am so fortunate to work with such a wonderful group of people in this organization. I am very grateful every day for each and every one of you who are so generous with their time and talents to make STU an organization that you would actually want to be part of!!! I want to thank all the members who worked on and attended the Member's Only Luncheon on May 7. We had a lovely luncheon, followed by a plant exchange and herbal trivia game at the Southside Place Clubhouse. Thanks also to **Susan Wood** for taking the "bull by the horns" and making reservations for **BOTH Herb Day AND Herb Fair** dates at the Clubhouse. What a great thing for whoever decides to chair these events. Many thanks also to our Program Chair **Karen Cottingham** for the fabulous programming both for our unit and the general public! We are so lucky to have so many different opportunities to experience herbs, friends and gardening!

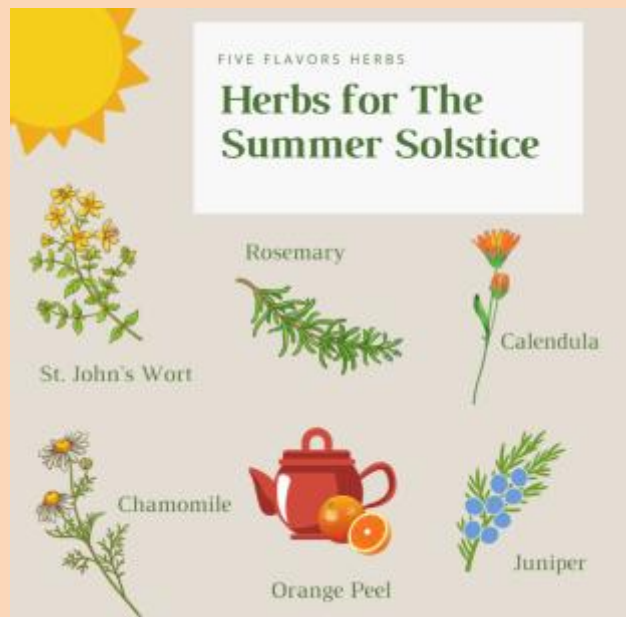
All members should make every effort to attend the **Annual Meeting** on Zoom Wednesday, June 15 at 6:30 pm. You should receive the minutes from last year's meeting, 2021 Financial Report, 2022 Proposed Budget and any Garden Donation Proposals either in this newsletter or a separate email at least 2 weeks before the meeting. This should give you adequate time to understand the material and to ask questions if you need further clarification.

"The older I get, the more I aspire to tap into the symphonic song of nature. To harmonize with the flow of seasons, the cycles in our landscapes, and the larger universe." This thought is from one of my new favorite gardeners, **John Forti**. I follow him on Facebook and am enjoying his latest book, *The Heirloom Gardener Traditional Plants & Skills for the Modern World*. It is in this spirit, that we have planned to celebrate the **Summer Solstice** at the Westbury Community Garden on June 21. Please join us and see the garden in all its glory! Here are a couple of informational websites to get you excited!!!

Until next month,  
Julie



<https://gather victoria.com/2016/06/10/sweet-magic-summer-solstice-honey-cookies/>



<https://fiveflavors herbs.com/blog/herbs-to-celebrate-the-summer-solstice/>



## **ANNUAL MEETING**

**June 15, 2022**

*Please review the Garden Donation Proposals*

### **Donation for Cultivator Giving Circle Membership at the Houston Botanic Garden**

I move The Herb Society of America - South Texas Unit continues to support Houston Botanic Garden with a \$1,500 donation for Cultivator Giving Circle Membership for 2022-23. This contribution level gives free admission for up to 10 of our members a day and discounts of \$10 per workshop or special event. Tickets are easily accessible by request from our Treasurer. Houston Botanic Garden provides many educational events for all ages to enjoy the benefits of gardening with a world class collection of plants showing the diversity of what can be grown in our climate. **Submitted by Susan Wood**

### **A Picnic Table for the Westbury Garden Pavilion**

The HSA-STU Medicinal Herb Garden at the Westbury Community Garden is an excellent example of what wonderful things can sprout when someone (actually, our Unit Chair, **Julie Fordes**), decides to plant a few experimental seeds. Herb seeds, of course, such as chamomile and calendula, but seeds of outreach, friendship, and sharing as well. The Westbury Medicinal Garden has evolved into a place where gardeners - HSA members as well as other Community Gardeners - gather to learn about herbs. From planting to nurturing, and then to harvesting and starting over, gardeners learn from and encourage each other.

The covered pavilion next to the Medicinal Garden is a spacious area perfect for informal gatherings. Whether it's sharing a cup of herbal tea, comparing recipes for herbal salves, or a more organized activity such as making St. Brigid's Crosses or celebrating the Herbs of the Summer Solstice, the Pavilion is a lovely outdoor classroom that the entire community of Westbury gardeners and herb-lovers regularly uses and enjoys.

My proposal is to purchase an additional picnic table for the Pavilion, which will allow us to expand our educational activities to a wider audience. A sturdy wooden picnic table will probably cost about \$500.00 - \$600.00, depending on whether or not someone volunteers to assemble the table. I propose that we designate up to \$600.00 of our charitable donations for 2022 for a picnic table for the Westbury Community Garden Pavilion.

**Submitted by Karen Cottingham**







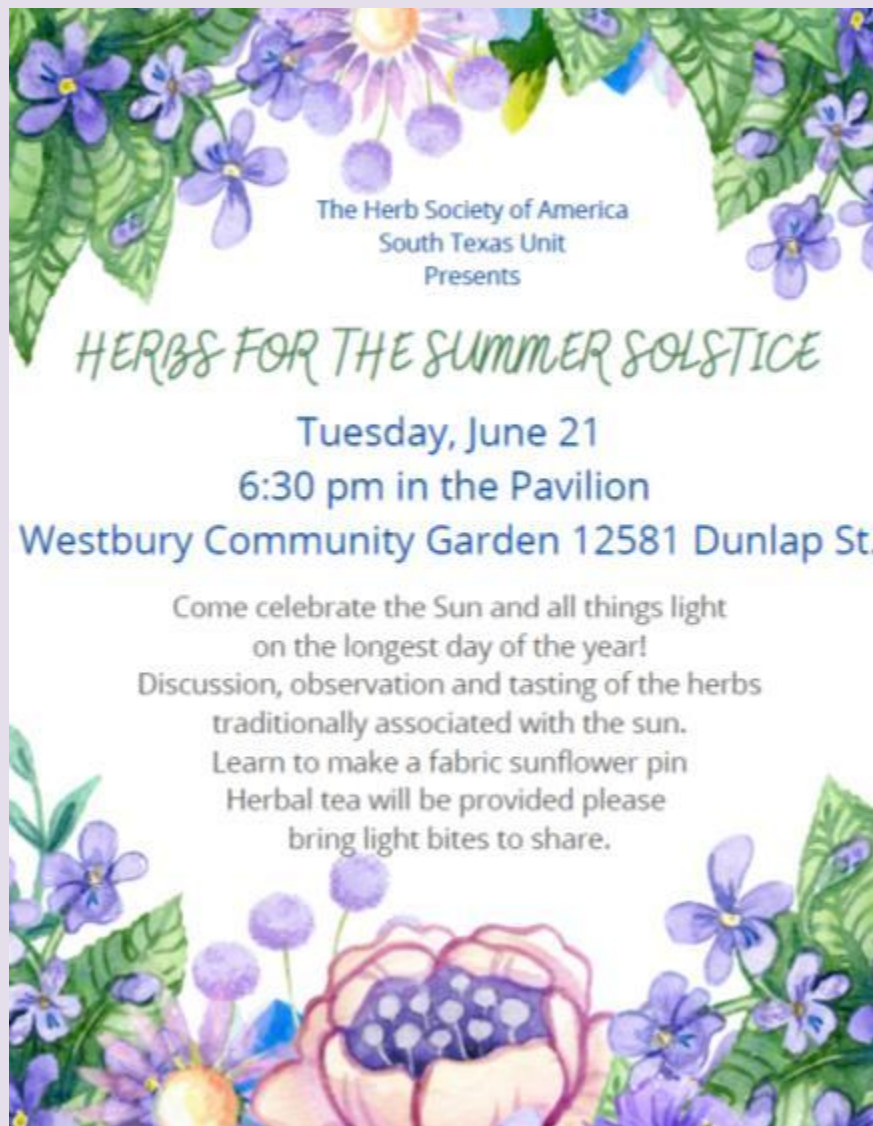
## Herbs Make Scents

June 2022



**HSA-STU MEMBERSHIP  
RENEWAL PERIOD  
JUNE 1 – JULY 31, 2022**

Visit the [HSA-STU Website](#) OR mail to (HSA-STU P.O. Box 6515 Houston, TX 77265-6515)



The Herb Society of America  
South Texas Unit  
Presents

*HERBS FOR THE SUMMER SOLSTICE*

Tuesday, June 21  
6:30 pm in the Pavilion  
Westbury Community Garden 12581 Dunlap St.

Come celebrate the Sun and all things light  
on the longest day of the year!  
Discussion, observation and tasting of the herbs  
traditionally associated with the sun.  
Learn to make a fabric sunflower pin  
Herbal tea will be provided please  
bring light bites to share.

Bee Photo:  
Eric Ward  
Unsplash



HSA -STU JUNE LAGNIAPPE

The Comfort of Chai -  
Warm, Spicy, and Healing



Presented by:  
Asal Shokati, Ayurvedic Practitioner

Join Us June 25 10:30 - 12:30  
at the Home of Elizabeth Grandich

Create Your Own Chai Tea Blend  
According to Ayurvedic Principles

Quality Ingredients and Traditional Snacks  
from Pondicheri Bake Lab + Shop Provided

There will be a small charge for the cost of materials and treats  
RSVP with Karen Cottingham [karen.redbrick@gmail.com](mailto:karen.redbrick@gmail.com)





## Full Moon Ramble Has New Hosts

**Nicole Buegers** and **Laura Mullen** are now hosting our once a month virtual meeting on the full moon. This is a time for members to catch up with one another while discussing the herb of the month, the full moon, and anything else going on in our gardens. We will provide recipes for food, teas and cocktails that use or complement the herb of the month, and there's always a little trivia too!

The **June 14 Strawberry Moon Ramble** will focus on Sweet Basil, don't miss it!!

Photo by malith d karunaratnel on Unsplash

A  
Grand Welcome  
To Our  
NEW MEMBER!



### Membership: Last Call for Directory Updates!

Carolyn Kosclskey, Membership Chair

**DIRECTORY UPDATE COMING OUT SOON!** Our latest Directory (violet color) published more than 6 months ago is ready for a "refresh." Updates will include new members not listed in the Directory and members whose contact information has changed. If you have changed any of your contact information listed in the Directory or on the website please email those changes by the end of June to [stxu.membership@gmail.com](mailto:stxu.membership@gmail.com)



A BIG THANK YOU TO MARIA AND DONALD  
FOR A BEE-UTIFUL BACKYARD BEE LAGNIAPPE  
WE CELEBRATED WORLD BEE DAY IN STYLE!



Photos courtesy of Karen Cottingham



## Volunteering Made Easy

*Serve on a Committee*

*Host STU Meetings*

*Create fundraising crafts*

*Grow & Dry Herbs*

*Write Herb-related Articles*

*Serve as Board Member*

*Work in Unit-sponsored Herb Garden*

*Host or Hostess for STU Meetings*

The South Texas Unit activities are accomplished through the efforts of our volunteers.

*Thank you to all of our volunteers!*

*Review the Applications*

*Madalene Hill  
Scholarship*

The Scholarship Committee is asking for member volunteers to review the applications, Please contact Catherine at [Vibrio13@gmail.com](mailto:Vibrio13@gmail.com) or 281-467-1139 to help.

**Catherine O'Brien** sent out scholarship applications to 25 colleges and universities around the State of Texas. More information can be found on our website at <http://www.herbsociety-stu.org/scholarship-award.html>.

*Speakers Bureau*

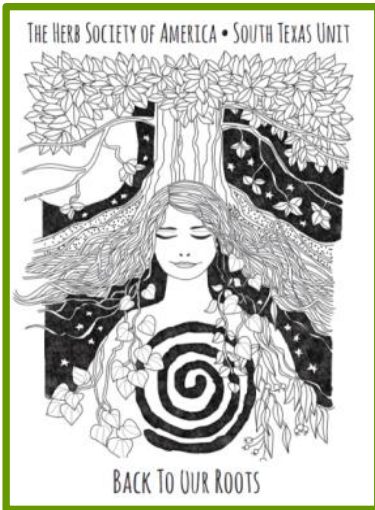
If you know of a group that is interested in having a speaker, please contact **Catherine O'Brien** at [Vibrio13@gmail.com](mailto:Vibrio13@gmail.com) or 281-467-1139.

Contact us if you are interested in joining the Speakers' Bureau.

# Congratulations Laura Mullen!

Laura Mullen, a member of the South Texas Unit, is the newly elected HSA Treasurer and Chairperson of the Finance and Operations Committee





## BACK TO OUR ROOTS

Julie Fordes

Thanks to all of the willing workers and waterers who are keeping the garden going. Here's what's happening at the garden. We are harvesting something every couple of days. It's becoming necessary to check on things pretty often. Our "Orange King" calendula is gorgeous! The chamomile seems to be dwindling; it really is more of a cool weather plant. At the same time, three varieties of holy basil have come back from last year's seed and are happy with the heat.

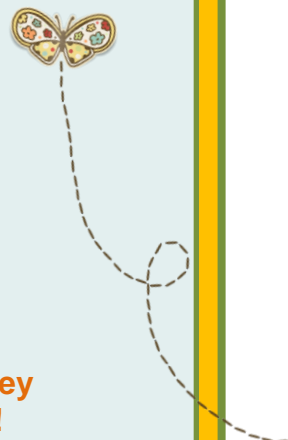
There are some significant renovations we are considering at the garden. One would be to increase growing space by re-homing the lemongrass to someone and reducing the amount of comfrey in the bed. We would like to expand the butterfly pea trellises. If you have a trellis or materials to make one that you would like to donate to the garden call me. We have been gifted four lavender plants by some of the Westbury gardeners. These plants can be difficult to grow in this humid climate. I think we should give it a shot, however. I am looking for some pots to put them in as they don't need as much watering as the rest of the plants. Again, let me know if you have a good-sized pot to donate. Down the road, making a nice hypertufa planter would be perfect.

I hope you can make it to the garden sometime soon.  
Julie

### Dry & Save These Herbs



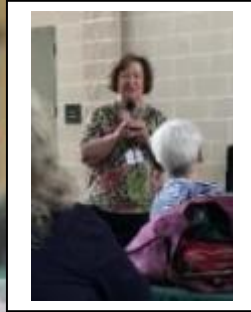
- |                       |                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Calendula Flowers     | Red-Stemmed Apple Mint |
| Chamomile Flowers     | Rose Petals            |
| Lemongrass            | Roselle (Hibiscus)     |
| Lemon Balm            | Rosemary               |
| Lemon Verbena         | Sage                   |
| Mexican Mint Marigold | Spearmint & Peppermint |
| Oregano               | Stevia                 |
| Passionflower (New)   | Thyme                  |



**Comfrey  
Too!**

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

Visit: [Harvesting, Storing & Drying Herbs](#)



Photos courtesy of  
Dena Yanowski



*Members Only Potluck  
and  
New Members  
Orientation  
May 7, 2022*



**Membership Tips: Submitting Your 2021-2022 Hours**  
Carolyn Kosclskey, Membership Chair

**PLEASE SUBMIT YOUR MEMBERSHIP HOURS FOR  
JULY 1, 2021 through JUNE 30, 2022**

**By Wednesday, June 15**

**Email to [stxu.membership@gmail.com](mailto:stxu.membership@gmail.com)**

**Include your name and total number of hours only**

**\*For June 2022 estimate last half or carry-over to next month.  
Hours should be reported in whole and half hour increments.**

**1 hour = 1.0**

**1 hour 10 minutes = 1.0\***

**1 hour 15 minutes = 1.5**

**1 hour 30 minutes = 1.5**

**1 hour 45 minutes = 2.0**

**\*carry over time less than 15 minutes to next month**





**WESTBURY COMMUNITY GARDEN  
Summer Volunteer Schedule**



We are meeting on Thursday evenings @ 6:30  
for the next two months. See the dates below.

JUNE 9

JUNE 16

JULY 7

JULY 21

In addition, volunteers should also water and harvest herbs  
during the other days of the week.

Along with your tools, etc. bring a mug for tea. I'll bring hot  
water. Snacks will not be turned away.

Julie

Come celebrate the Sun and all things LIGHT  
Tuesday, June 21 @ 6:30  
See *Herbs for the Summer Solstice* Invitation on page 4.





The Herb Society of America  
Annual Meeting, April 29, 2022  
Charleston, South Carolina

Connecting with New and Old Friends in a Beautiful City



Pictured above: **Laura Mullen**, newly elected HSA Treasurer, **Dena and Donna Yanowski**, **William “Bill” Varney**, South Central District Delegate, **Karen Cottingham** with HSA President, **Linda Lange**, and **Lois Sutton**.

Photos courtesy of Karen Cottingham





## The Herb Society of America Annual Meeting, April 29, 2022 Charleston, South Carolina

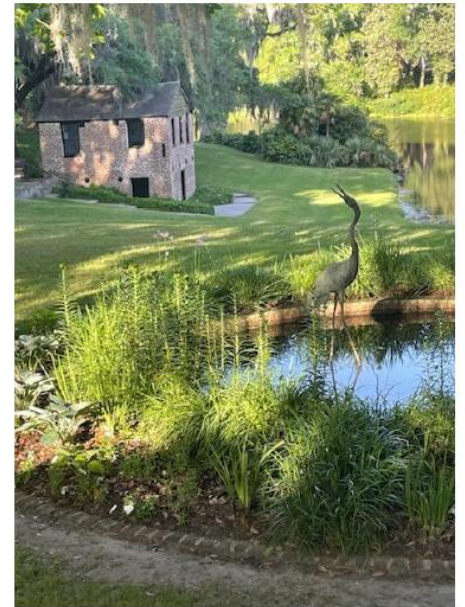
### Connecting with New and Old Friends in a Beautiful City



View of bench along Ashley River at Middleton Place Plantation, Charleston. Middleton Place Foundation, a non profit educational trust, was established in 1974 for historic preservation, documented research and interpretation. Tours of house and gardens are open to the public.



L-R: Susan Wood (HSA Golden Sage) Chrissy Moore (HSA Honorary President & Curator National Herb Garden) and Kathe Forrest (Chair, Pioneer Unit) at Church and Union in Historic downtown Charleston for dinner after Annual Meeting on April 29, 2022



View toward Chapel outside Middleton Place Inn restaurant. Oldest landscaped gardens in America dating to 1741. The 55 room Inn opened in 1987 with highest honors by American Institute of Architects for its design.



Historic home in downtown Charleston, located in area called "SOB" (South of Broadway) as seen from horse drawn carriage. These homes are grander than those in area called "SNOB" (Slightly North of Broadway).



Tools used on the plantation exhibited at the Stables of Middleton Place Plantation.

[Middleton Place](#)



## **2022 Charleston Annual Meeting**

Susan Wood

One of my favorite things about membership in The Herb Society of America is the invitation to our yearly Annual Meeting. After the Presidency of **Arlene Kessler**, The Society started alternating years with an Educational Conference (EdCon) to provide learning experiences beyond visiting private and public gardens. For me, visiting the private and public gardens was the best part. So, on years when only the Annual Meeting is held, I like to add my own optional days to do just that.

This year in Charleston was a one-day Annual Meeting. That means a reception on Thursday evening and then one long day of meetings and presentations on Friday ending before dinner. You might travel quite a distance to arrive in time for Thursday night's reception, have Friday night dinner on your own with most people departing the next day. If traveling by air it is often possible to stay a couple extra days at little or no extra cost just by booking off peak days (Wednesday and Monday for example). EdCon next year is in Baton Rouge which will allow many members and guests from Texas to drive, arriving and leaving at their leisure. Save the dates for April 27 – 29, 2023, and start planning all the things you might like to see and do while in the area.

Remember when attending the meeting or conference to venture out from your own Unit attendees to meet all the wonderful members nationwide. I guarantee you will make new friends.

Enjoy some of my photos from Charleston where I visited the historic downtown district and stayed 2 extra nights at fabulous Middleton Place Plantation in their modern Inn. I loved strolling about the 110 acres of grounds at a relaxed pace to enjoy all the historic structures and exhibits including 65 acres of America's oldest landscaped gardens.■







## AT-HOME RECIPES



### AT-HOME RECIPES

June 2022

Carolyn Kosclskey

On the first Saturday in May members met mid-morning at the Southside Place Club House for the first ever STU Social and Potluck Luncheon. What a lovely place to be on a very warm Saturday for an event held in lieu of our annual Herb Day due to ongoing pandemic precautions. To make sure the day was special, the morning started earlier for some including event organizer **Catherine O'Brien** who along with husband Jeff set-up the room and made ready for guests; for hospitality chair **Rose Wherry** who organized both serving areas; for **Pam Harris** and **Cynthia Card** who decorated the tables so beautifully, and for **Beth Murphy** and **Lois Jean Howard** and their garden of potted plants free for all members. Also appreciated were **Julie Fordes** and her husband George and son Michael who assisted with setting up the tables and other "heavy lifting" jobs as needed. Thank you from all to Jeff, George and Michael!

As members entered they were invited to sit at tables covered in forest green with centerpieces of spring flowers surrounded by Origami cranes, both handmade by Cynthia Card. In addition, each table had a complimentary set of note cards with botanical photographs created by Cynthia, all tied with sheer ribbon in pastel colors. Thank you Cynthia for going above and beyond making the room beautiful.

After the almost two dozen guests arrived, placed their potluck dishes on the main dining table or in the dessert area and selected their places to sit, they were invited to select from a variety of very nice herb plants provided by Beth and Lois Jean. At 11 Julie invited all to enjoy the potluck lunch. Following lunch unit chair Julie Fordes begin the program with her recently produced and informative PowerPoint "new member orientation." Board members and committee chairs were next invited to give a brief oversight of their position. The last part of the program was a fun herb trivia quiz designed and presented by secretary **Dena Yanowski**. Thank you Dena Yanowski!

### TOMATO CUCUMBER QUINOA SALAD An Easy No-Recipe Recipe

This is a very easy summer salad with a base of quinoa, although brown rice could also be used. To the quinoa you can add in as much of each ingredient as you like or have on hand, then season to taste and add dressing.

#### Ingredients

2 cups cooked quinoa

1-3 large tomatoes cut into bite size pieces, or cherry tomatoes cut in half

1 cucumber, cut into bite size pieces



Bell or sweet peppers, cut into small pieces  
Red onion, as much as desired finely chopped  
Cilantro, thick stems discarded and leaves finely chopped  
Feta cheese crumbles, optional  
Avocado, half or whole cut into pieces  
Salt and pepper, season to taste  
Lemon juice to brighten flavors, about 2 tablespoons or to taste  
Oil and vinegar home made dressing, or bottled dressing

Cook quinoa according to package directions. Fluff with fork and add to large bowl to cool. Chop tomatoes, cucumber and peppers into bite size pieces. Dice red onion into small pieces and add with veggies to quinoa bowl. If using avocado dice and add to small bowl with lemon juice to prevent browning, or set aside to be added to individual servings. Holding stem end of cilantro scrape toward leaves, discarding thicker stems before chopping. Add cilantro to bowl and stir all together. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Stir in dressing and taste to determine amount of lemon juice to add.

### **DONNA'S CHICKEN SALAD**

*From the files of Donna Yanowski*

This is a great example of a “no-recipe recipe” making a dish from what you have on hand.

#### Ingredients

Cooked chicken or rotisserie chicken meat, minced into small pieces  
Tamarind paste or date chutney mixed with mayo or plain yogurt  
Pecans, lightly toasted in a skillet with a tiny bit of butter, then chopped  
Craisins, raisins or dried cherries, to taste  
Seasoning, salt and pepper to taste

Using a chicken you cooked or a store bought rotisserie chicken, remove the meat from the bones, discard the skin and chop into small pieces and add to a bowl. Mix tamarind paste or a date chutney with mayo or plain yogurt, and stir into chicken. Melt a tiny bit of butter in a heavy skillet to coat and add a handful of chopped pecans. Lightly toast then add to bowl with chicken. Stir in Craisins, raisins or dried cherries to taste. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Cover and refrigerate until chilled. Great for making “tea sandwiches” or regular sandwiches, or serving on a lettuce leaf.

### **ROSE GERANIUM BUTTERMILK POUND CAKE**

*From the files of Tricia Bradbury*

Rose geranium leaves add a pleasing floral scent to this pound cake.

#### Ingredients

½ pound (2 sticks) butter  
2 ¼ cups granulated sugar  
4 large eggs  
2 teaspoons vanilla



Grated zest of 1/2 lemon (used zest from whole lemon)  
2 tablespoons minced rose geranium leaves, plus blossoms and leaves to garnish\* (better flavor with 3 heaping tablespoons)  
3 cups all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1 cup buttermilk

*\*select rose geranium stems that are organic and have not been sprayed with any insecticides. Rinse stems in cool water and blot dry. Stems may be preserved until used by wrapping in barely damp paper or tea towel and placed in plastic bag in refrigerator.*

### Instructions

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Butter and flour a large Bundt pan. Cream 1/2 pound butter and 2 ¼ cups sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in 4 eggs, one at a time, then add 2 teaspoons vanilla, the grated zest of 1/2 lemon, and 2 tablespoons minced rose geranium leaves. In a separate bowl, combine 3 cups all-purpose flour, a pinch of salt, and 1 teaspoon baking soda. Starting and ending with the dry ingredients, alternately add the flour mixture and 1 cup buttermilk to the batter. Pour the batter into the pan and bake for 1 hour and 10 minutes, or until just set in the middle. Cool before removing from the pan, then dust with confectioners' sugar and sprinkle with rose geranium blossoms and garnish with leaves. Serves 10. Note: If using convection oven set to 325 degrees for 65 minutes.

Adapted from *Field Guide to Herbs & Spices*, by Aliza Green

As we move into early summer and warmer weather with access to more produce from our gardens at the market, don't miss opportunities to enjoy healthy eating by selection of dishes with emphasis on plant based foods. Dietary Guidelines for Americans reminds us of portion control and selecting nutrient-dense foods and beverages with a variety from each food group. Make every bite count!

**Independence Day is on Monday, July 4 and is the third of four patriotic holidays ending with Labor Day on September 5. "Remembered family recipes" from these holidays will be featured for each holiday. Members celebrating their birthdays that month (there are 8!) will be invited to submit a recipe they remember from years past, along with memories of how their summer was celebrated.**





**Eat, Drink and Be Rosemary**



Janice Freeman diligently working to capture a picture of a beautiful red dragonfly.



Julie Fordes demonstrates how to give a smile...from ear to ear.



**South Texas Unit**



Karen Cottingham engaged in a fascinating topic.



Catherine O'Brien takes notes on how to start a bee hive. What will she do with all those notes?





## A Little Midsummer Magic

Karen Cottingham



Young Latvians celebrating the Summer Solstice in traditional Midsummer crowns.  
Midsummer celebrations are enthusiastic expressions of the Latvian national identity and spirit that were suppressed during the Soviet era.

The magic of a northern Midsummer can be a bit challenging for residents of the “heat-belt” to understand. But try to imagine this scene - a night sky still glowing with light at 4 a.m., lush green meadows exploding with wildflowers, birds bursting forth with jubilant song, and bees drunk with nectar. There’s an unrestrained, overflowing sense of ecstatic abundance, a powerful, mysterious fecundity. Life is in full bloom; it hums with energy and vigor. There is honestly nothing like it.

Growing up just an hour’s drive from the Canadian border, my summers were flooded with sunlight well into the evening. I remember watching and wondering as the sun tracked slowly across the sky - rising and setting a little further north each day, then slowly retreating back to the south. In my small agricultural community I was intimately familiar with the yearly cycles of planting and harvesting.

But I had never heard of Midsummer. Not even from my Scandinavian grandparents.



I suppose that's not unusual. Understanding solstices and equinoxes was one thing, but familiarity with ancient pagan festivals was another. In the America of my childhood, we celebrated Independence Day, not Midsummer. Even today, the scattered Midsummer celebrations that are held in the United States are for the most part in communities of northern European immigrants or by groups of Neopagans.

For those who are equally unfamiliar, yet curious about Summer Solstice celebrations, the South Texas Unit invites you to a casual gathering at the Westbury Community Garden Pavilion to celebrate the **"Herbs of the Summer Solstice"**.

Midsummer occurs on June 21 this year, and everyone interested in this central turning point of the year is invited to join us at 6:30 pm for an informal and educational celebration. Whatever your interest might be - ancient religions, folklore, or superstition; the changing of the seasons; or simply summertime herbs - there will be something for you. See the Chairman's Corner (p. 2) and the event invitation (p.4) for further details.

The Summer Solstice occurs on the longest day of the year, on or about June 21 in the Northern hemisphere, and on or about December 21 in the Southern hemisphere.



Herbs of the Summer Solstice

Because of the Earth's 23.5° tilt, the length of each day varies as we orbit the sun. Starting with the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, day length progressively increases until the vernal equinox when night and day are equal. From that point forward, days continue to lengthen until reaching their maximum at the Summer Solstice. The process then reverses, like the swinging pendulum of a clock.

From my childhood home on the west-facing side of a hill, I had a perfect view of the trajectory of the setting sun - the December sunset very far south on the horizon (and so very early in the afternoon!) and then in June, far to the north and wonderfully late in the evening. Although I didn't realize it at the time, recognition of the solstices and the equinoxes was of singular importance to early cultures.



Summer Solstice Sunrise at Stonehenge

Knowledge of the solar movements was critical for successful planting and harvests and formed the basis of important cultural beliefs and religious practices.

Perhaps the best known structure designed to track the movement of the sun is Stonehenge, a mysterious 5,000 year-old ring of standing stones in Wiltshire, England. If you stand inside the ring, facing northeast through the entrance, you'll see the summer solstice sunrise above the Heel Stone, a single block of stone just outside of the circle.





Another structure aligned precisely to the movement of the sun is “El Castillo”, the step pyramid at the Mayan city Chichén Itzá. Constructed over a span of centuries, the axes running through the pyramid’s northwest and southwest corners are oriented toward the rising point of the sun at the summer solstice and its setting point at the winter solstice. Pictured here at the Summer Solstice, the north and east sides are illuminated while the south and west sides are covered in shade, creating the effect of splitting the pyramid diagonally into two.



The Step Pyramid of Chichén Itzá on the Summer Solstice



Simulation of the sun’s rays on both solstices entering through windows at the Incan Temple of the Sun

The Incas, who not only worshipped a sun deity but believed themselves to be descendants of the sun, constructed the magnificent Temple of the Sun in Machu Picchu with both solstices in mind. At daybreak on the Winter Solstice the sun’s rays shine through the larger of the temple’s two windows to precisely illuminate the ceremonial stone within. The second window is perfectly aligned with the Summer Solstice sunrise, once again allowing the sun’s rays to flood the sacred space. The semi-circular temple thus served as a calendar, a solar observatory, and a sacred site for religious rituals. Precise knowledge of the solstices would have been crucial to guide their religious ceremonies as well as their agricultural practices.

And on the other side of the world, Mongolian shamans or *Buu*, still summon ancestral spirits by performing fire rituals at the time of the Summer Solstice. Banned for 70 years while Mongolia was under Communist rule, shamanism has seen a resurgence since the ancient practice became protected by the country's Constitution in 1992. Mongolian shamanism, also known as *Tengerism*, is now widely regarded as Mongolia's national religion and an important part of its indigenous identity.



Mongolian shamans performing Summer Solstice fire rituals



Today, the Summer Solstice is celebrated as far abroad as China, Greece, and Spain, and as close by as the traditional lands of Native American tribes. When we reflect upon Summer Solstice celebrations, though, we are far more likely to identify with the ancestors of today's Northern Europeans - the Slavic, Celtic, Baltic, Germanic and Nordic tribes - than with shamans of the Mongolian steppes.

While I'm sure that all of these solstice practices are fascinating, I decided to select one specific



cultural group that we could fairly easily identify with and then explore some of their authentic Midsummer practices. The remainder of this article will therefore focus on Midsummer celebrations specific to Latvia.

Why Latvia, a tiny country which, along with Estonia and Lithuania, today comprise the Baltic States? Because compared to other countries, the ancient traditions of Latvia have been so remarkably well-preserved. Their authentic pagan beliefs are indelibly woven through song and ritual in a peasant's version of a medieval manuscript.

The celebration of Midsummer everywhere is based on the ancient stories and beliefs of particular groups of people. And while there are certain common features - the fire-based celebration of the sun's power, for example, and the hope for the continued abundance of nature - the original details are almost always embellished or diluted as cultures merge, alliances shift, and Christianization occurs.

While Europe and the British Isles were changing dramatically - Christianity was introduced to Ireland, for example, in the fifth century - the pagan tribes in what we call Latvia were relatively undisturbed. Living their secluded lives in thick forests protected by bogs and swamps, they followed the old ways as they had for generations while the world around them was changing.

The introduction of Christianity to the Baltic tribes occurred very late in history, with Estonia and Latvia undergoing conversion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and Lithuania, "the last pagans of Europe," holding out until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The process, sadly, was not without resistance and misery. authorized the military subjugation and conversion of the Baltic tribes. Since their conversion was by force rather than by persuasion, it's not surprising that the "converted" tribes continued to follow their ancient traditions.



As time went on, the impoverished Latvian serfs were dominated by one group after another - Polish, Russian, German, and Swedish - of which none had any interest in the traditional practices of the

subjugated people. Sheltered from interference by the indifferent foreigners, the traditional Latvian beliefs survived beautifully in practice, folk songs, and stories. Luckily, the strict structure of Latvian folk songs, which was meant to facilitate memorization, also tended to discourage any substitution





of new words and phrases. The ancient belief system was thus preserved in song just like the bees that were caught in Baltic amber.

Most recently, during Soviet domination, authorities prohibited the Midsummer celebration altogether as “nationalistic”. This only increased the Latvian determination to preserve their traditional culture, and many chose to celebrate as usual in defiance of the ban.

The Latvian Midsummer celebration is called either “*Līgo*” or “*Jāņi*”. The names are commonly used interchangeably, but *Līgo* (pronounced “leegwa”) correctly refers to Midsummer Eve (June 23rd) and *Jāņi* the following day (June 24th). Ironically, the Summer Solstice never actually occurs on either of these days. After Christianity arrived in the Baltics, the traditional pagan festival was moved to coincide with St. John the Baptist’s Feast Day; but certainly for the 93% of Latvians who do not attend church regularly, this association is largely irrelevant. Midsummer, as celebrated today, commemorates the ancient peoples who believed in fertility rituals and worshipped the sun for having reached its highest point in the sky.



Greeting the rising sun on *Jāņi*. It was thought that bonfires would boost the sun’s energy for the rest of the growing season and guarantee a good harvest for the fall

Once a year, the old stories tell, when the spring sowing was completed and the summer hay-making not yet begun, the ancient fertility deity *Jānis* appeared beating a copper drum and blowing a copper horn. As he blessed all the fields, meadows, forests and homes, he also brought luck, abundance, and fertility to the Latvian people. Peasants gathered to honor *Jānis*, to sing the old songs, and to perform rituals. Some rituals predicted the future, others kept evil spirits at bay, and others brought blessings and good fortune into the household. Many were fertility rites – for the harvest, the livestock, and for the young men and women in the family.

The celebrations in the old times lasted for several days if not weeks, beginning two weeks before *Jāņi*, reaching its highest point on *Jāņi* Eve, and lasting until *Māras* Day, a harvest festival devoted to *Māra*, the highest-ranking goddess in Latvian mythology. With Christianization, *Māras* Day was shifted to August 15, which was already the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.





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A few churches continue to honor the old harvest festivals by offering The Blessing of the Herbs and Flowers on the Feast of the Assumption.

Today, of course, the solstice celebrations in Latvia are limited to *Līgo*, June 23, and *Jāņi*, June 24. *Līgo*, also known as *Zāļu Day* “(Herbal Day)”, is the day that herbs, flowers, and grasses are collected for the Midsummer celebration and to dry for medicinal teas for the following year. According to traditional belief, herbs harvested at Midsummer had magical powers of healing, protection, divination, and could even be used as love charms.

In 1627, Paul Einhorn, a Latvian pastor and historian of pre-Christian beliefs, described the supernatural power of herbs this way: “*Jāņi Day* is given the power and sanctity of the herbs and its daily gathering, and has great and excellent properties against fires, people's and livestock's evil plagues and diseases.”

On *Zāļu Day*, a strong tea of medicinal herbs was given to people and even livestock that were ailing. Specific herbs were believed to have specific powers - on *Jāņi Day*, for example, children who were ill, anxious, or affected by the evil eye were fumigated with wands of smoking rowan twigs. Some of the other herbs typically gathered at Midsummer include red and white clover, chamomile, bedstraw, yarrow, peppermint, meadowsweet, valerian, and cornflower.



Midsummer flower crowns are for pets, too; medicinal herbs drying at the Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum; and a young Latvian woman picking flowers and grasses in a hay meadow

At the time of the Summer Solstice, plants were believed to contain the power and the heightened life force of the sun. Since exposure to such supernaturally charged plants greatly increased the likelihood of a bountiful harvest and health and fertility for the coming year, people decorated their homes and property - and even themselves, their pets and their livestock - abundantly with flowers, grasses, and branches. Bedstraw, ferns, oxeye daisies, cow wheat, vetchling, and clover were some of the most common plants gathered, but any herbaceous plant could be used. Everything, down to the keyholes, was decorated with garlands, flowers and grasses - indoor rooms, doors, courtyards, gates, barns, granaries, the sauna, and today, even the cars.

Specific tree species were also used as material for decoration. Birch saplings, for example, were propped up next to doors and in the corners of every room. Oak, linden, and rowan branches were commonly used to decorate for Midsummer; but aspen was avoided. Since aspen grows so rapidly, it

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was considered to take, rather than to give, energy. (Making it useful to relieve anxiety, but a little dangerous at *Jāņi*.)

Fortunately, placing prickly plants such as thorns, thistles, and nettles at doorways prevented any witches or evil spirits roaming about from entering. Rowan branches were also believed to repel witches, and even today, a rowan branch is often left by the house door until the next year's midsummer festival.



Gathering plants to weave into wreaths and crowns was another way to harness their protective powers and to preserve nature's magic. Traditionally, women gathered the necessary herbs, flowers, grasses, and leaves from the fields and forests, but today, materials can be purchased at special Midsummer's Eve Herb Markets. The only requirement is that the materials for the crowns must be collected at their peak of their magical powers.



*Jāņi* crowns and flowers for sale at "The Herbs and Grass Market" in Old Riga



the ancient rituals of *Jāņi* that are re-enacted today, there are some that might not be for all celebrants - jumping over bonfires, for example, or swimming naked - but just about everyone enjoys wearing a crown of leaves or flowers.

Men and boys wear huge wreaths of oak leaves on their heads just as their ancestors did. Oak is the ancient male symbol of power, representing stability, longevity, and strength. Women and girls wear wreaths of daisies, cornflowers, and clovers tied together with grasses and embellished with the leaves and fragrant flowers of the sacred linden tree.

What else might these ceremonial wreaths have signified to the original wearers?





**Symbolism:** Ancient Latvians believed that a wreath, along with other round or circular objects, symbolized the sun and its yearly cycles.



**Protection:** The summer solstice was a perilous as well as a blessed time, and wreaths made of magical plants protected the wearer from the evil and chaos swirling about. The magic circles also kept the family pets and livestock safe.

Some protection myths were more specific. For example, wreaths braided with exactly twenty seven flowers and herbs not only repelled enemies but prevented disasters and diseases. And if the crowns were later hung in the house, they would absorb all the troubles of the year. The dried crowns full of misfortune were then thrown onto the next *Jāņi* bonfire. Another wreath always replaced the old one and the family started the year trouble-free.

**Success in Farming:** Oak wreaths were thought to bring blessings to horses and bees, and cows adorned with buttercup crowns produced rich and creamy milk.

**Divination:** If you wanted to know the identity of the one you will marry, you could make a crown of nine blossoms each of nine different wildflowers, wear the crown as you sleep, and

you would dream of your future husband.

Or, if you wanted to know how many years will pass before you marry, you could throw your crown up into the branches of an apple tree. The number of throws needed for the wreath to be caught on a branch revealed the number of years you will have to wait.

Remnants of this ancient tradition persist in today's wedding celebrations when the bride throws her bouquet to her unmarried attendants.

**Romance:** It was once believed that Midsummer night was the time people fell in love with each other (*Jāņi* did originate as a fertility festival, after all) and crowns played an important role in this process. In some areas crowns were placed on crossed wooden planks with a candle at the center and launched into a lake or river. If a flower and oak crown collided, a happy marriage was in the future.







If a young man dove into deep water to retrieve a particular crown, it was a very public way to proclaim his affection for the young woman who created it.

In another tradition, a girl might go into the woods to hide her crown, and if a boy later emerged with it, they could be engaged. Since a crown represents virginity in Baltic folklore, we can probably guess what happened out there in the woods.



A couple prepares their crowns for Midsummer

It was important for an unmarried girl to complete a wreath of 27 different herbs before midnight on Midsummer Eve if she wanted to attract her true love. And remember, if a woman makes a wreath for a man, she can use the power of her intentions and the magical properties of the plants to secure his affections.

And finally, **Reliving the Bloom of Youth:** Flower crowns were traditionally worn only by maidens, while married women wore scarves or traditional caps. On Midsummer Eve, however, all women wear crowns, and according to the folk song, “you don’t know who is a maiden and who a wife”.

The central purpose of Summer Solstice celebrations (besides carousing, of course) was to honor the sun’s victory over darkness. Tradition dictated that a solstice bonfire should be lit at sunset and kept burning throughout the night. Whenever possible, these *Jāņu* fires blazed from the highest point in the landscape. All the people seeing the light, no matter how distant, would be blessed, healthy, and fertile during the coming year, and all the fields as far as the light from the fire shone would have bountiful harvests.

Solstice bonfires ensured a successful harvest by helping the sun complete its yearly cycle and transmitting the power of its light to the next solar year. Any demons or evil spirits in the vicinity of the *Jāņu* fire were banished, those who had fallen ill were healed, and power, strength, and fertility were bestowed upon all who had been in its light.

As the fire died down, it was also traditional to jump over the bonfire to absorb its magical and healing properties.

Today, jumping the bonfire is one of the highlights of the Midsummer celebration. Couples in love, holding hands, leap over the fire, hoping that the magical force of the flames will bind them together.



The healing light of the *Jāņu* fire



If the couple should disengage their hands, though, the strength of their love is not sufficient for marriage.

For other jumpers, burdens and worries can be released; and prosperity, fertility, good luck and health are ensured for the next year.

For those who consider bonfire jumping a little too risky, there's a quieter magic in watching the sun slowly rise on Midsummer Day. Solstice blessings and promises of a fruitful life have been given and received. Evil has been banished. Medicinal herbs have been gathered and the harvest will be good.

All's right with the world.

And so it is, that from the pinnacle of its annual trajectory, the sun is about to embark on the slow journey back towards Winter.



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