

Digging in the Dirt: Gardens and Blessings

By Janet R. Kirchheimer, Special to the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent

I've been thinking about blessings - the blessings said before eating food. To be honest, I've never been very consistent about saying them, but that's been changing. My father has taught me to be a gardener.

Needless to say, it's given me another perspective on food and how it gets from the ground to the table. I grew up in Connecticut and now live in New York City. Living here, it's become easy to think that vegetables come from the Fairway or the Food Emporium, and that they really grow with that shiny stuff sprayed on them.

I've never been a nature girl and wanted nothing to do with my father's garden for many years. But that changed when I became

interested about two years ago. My father welcomed me into his garden. He taught me to smell the soil to see if it is good, to plant squash close together in a circle and then thin it out, to plant cucumbers near a fence so their tendrils can climb, and to help parsley to last until January or February by covering it at night once the frost hits. We worried about what would happen if there was no rain or too much rain. Many times, we were in the garden urging the plants to grow or just sitting on the lawn, watching and talking about how each plant was doing.

My father taught me that I had to get my hands in the soil. He said if I wore gloves I wouldn't be able to feel it. He taught me to feel the connection between the earth and me. It took time to get used to that. I was constantly on the look-

out for worms, snakes and bugs, but once I got over that fear, I couldn't wait to wake up early in the morning, go to the garden and see what had happened the previous night.

When I was back in New York, I would call home, and my father and I would discuss the garden. Even when I wasn't there, the garden was present in my life.



My father showed me how to hill and weed the plants as they were growing, and I began to feel like a kid again, covered from head to toe in dirt. I began to reconnect to the experience of seeing something for the first time. My heart jumped when I saw the seeds push their way up through the soil. When we began harvesting the plants, I ran to show my mother the first bunch of carrots, the first tomatoes and the first ears of corn. I began to understand why my father was always in his garden, and I wanted to be there, too. I enjoyed being in the dirt. If there wasn't something to be hilled, weeded or planted, I was disappointed.

Before becoming a gardener, it didn't contain much meaning for me when I would recite a blessing over food. I could recite the blessing in the morning: "Blessed are you, sovereign of the universe, who dresses the naked," because I knit, and I know the amount of work that goes into making a garment. As I put on my clothes, I could relate to the seriousness and intention of this blessing. I don't want to recite a blessing in vain, and I think the fact that I couldn't connect to an experience made it hard for me to consistently recite

the blessings over food.

And the garden got me thinking about how life flows like a figure eight. The more I gardened, the more I saw and felt the growing process, the more I saw how blessings are related to experience and how experience is related to blessings and how they are truly inseparable. I understood how blessings and experience constantly flow back and forth into and out of each other. I think that's probably what the rabbis had in mind when they created blessings.

My experience with blessings has been enriched because I made the connection that the rabbis were trying to teach. I don't mean to say that one must have a deep experience in order to recite a blessing. That's not possible every time and one doesn't need to have my type of direct experience, either.

In the end, I want a blessing to sustain me, to relate to an experience and I want my experiences to make me want to acknowledge them with blessings. ☆

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From Chef Dvorah Buhr's Tu B'Shevat Kitchen

Candied Clementines

1 dozen clementines, unpeeled (washed with top stem removed)
4 c. sugar
3 c. water

Pierce oranges with knife or toothpick 8-10 times. Combine sugar and water in a deep pot. Place clementines in this mixture and cover. Bring to gentle boil over medium heat taking care not to boil over. To prevent the mixture from foaming over, add 1 t. oil. Continue to simmer clementines for 1-1/2 hrs. till translucent. The syrup should thicken but must not caramelize. If the mixture becomes too thick, add additional water. Recipe may be varied by adding cinnamon sticks, cloves or sugar. Serve at room temperature as a treat with coffee or tea. Store in airtight container.

Mixed Nut Brittle

2 c. water
4 c. sugar
2 c. corn syrup
2 t. salt
4 c. assorted unsalted nuts (try walnuts, almonds, pecans, pine nuts, cashews, etc.)
1/4 c. butter
1/2 t. baking soda, dissolved in 1 t. water

Combine 1st 4 ingredients and bring to a gentle boil. Boil until candy thermometer reaches 225-230 degrees. Add the nuts and continue to stir till the temperature reaches 290 degrees. Remove from heat and add baking soda mixture and butter. Stir till incorporated. Spread on greased baking sheet. Let cool and break into pieces. Store in an airtight container.

Spicy Fruit Compote

1 c. prunes
1 c. golden raisins
1 c. dried apricots
1 c. dried cherries
2 c. sugar
2 c. wine (or grape juice)
2 c. apple or orange juice
1 t. cinnamon
1/2 t. cloves
1 t. allspice
1/2 t. black pepper
2 c. frozen sweet cherries

Put all ingredients except frozen cherries in a pot. Simmer over low heat till liquid is absorbed by the dried fruit (about 45 min.-1 hr.). Add water as the pan becomes dry. After the fruits have plumped up, you may cut them into smaller pieces. Add cherries (with their juice) and continue to simmer till hot and liquid thickens lightly. Remember to

keep on low heat, stirring often. Delicious hot or cold; as a side dish or over ice cream or cake.

May be refrigerated up to one month. ☆

Dvorah Buhr, a student in the Jewish Theological Seminary's H. L. Miller Cantorial School, is also an award-winning, certified pastry chef with a specialty in chocolate and candy production.

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