

Horticultural News and Research Important to American Gardeners

SPUDS GO LOW CARB

The popularity of the Atkins diet, advocating low carbohydrate/high protein intake for weight loss, has generated a plethora of low-carb products. Self-proclaimed low-carb versions of ice cream, soup, soft drinks, and even candy are popping up on supermarket shelves like mushrooms. Now, a low-carb potato has been developed by the Dutch seed company HZPC and is expected to appear in the gourmet produce aisles of America's grocery stores early next year.



Chad Hutchinson of the University of Florida shows off some of the low-carb potatoes expected to hit supermarkets next year.

While a 3.5 ounce serving of a typical Russet Burbank baking potato weighs in at about 19 grams of carbohydrates, the same size serving of the as-yet-unnamed low-carb potato will deliver only 13 grams, says potato expert Chad Hutchinson, an assistant professor of horticulture at the University of Florida in Gainesville. That is 30 percent fewer carbs as well as 25 percent fewer calories. Though "it's not a genetically-engineered crop," says Hutchinson, this potato won't

Aster La Vista?

Rumblings in the world of plant taxonomy that began a decade ago may eventually change the way we refer to a common genus of flowers—namely, the asters. That's if we care to be "BC"—botanically correct.

In a discipline in which genera are generally either lumped or split, the 306 species-rich genus *Aster* was a splitter's sitting duck. In 1994, Guy L. Nesom, now head of research at the Botanical Research Institute of Texas, used morphology to show that North American asters are part of a distinct, natural group that originated from South American and Old World species. Using



Botanists now classify bigleaf aster, left, in the genus *Eurybia*, and New England aster, right, in the genus *Symphyotrichum*.

DNA technology, other researchers subsequently confirmed Nesom's conclusions.

"Molecular evidence strongly shows that there are no true members of the genus *Aster* in North America," says John C. Semple, director of the WAT Herbarium and a professor of biology at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. "The one exception is the Arctic-alpine *Aster culminis*."

Of the many North American species formerly in the genus *Aster*, says Semple, "the majority belong in *Eurybia* and *Symphyotrichum*." For example, New England aster (*Aster novae-angliae*) is now considered *Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*, and white wood aster (*Aster divaricatus*) is now *Eurybia divaricata*.

While botanists have already adopted these nomenclatural changes, it may take some time for gardeners, horticulturists, and reference books to follow suit. Name changes, says Ron Petersen, a professor of botany at the University of Tennessee, are "often unpopular, for everyone has learned the 'popular usage' concept, and resents the imposition of the new name, even though it is scientifically necessary." For now, we're going to continue the practice of calling them asters.

"look like anything that's now on the market." Superb for baking, it is described as having exceptionally smooth skin and yellow flesh that hints at a healthful carotenoid content.

The Florida growers cooperative that purchased the only North American license to grow this potato plans to have it in supermarkets by January 2005; look for it in the gourmet vegetable section. Unlike storage potatoes that may be held for months, the low-carb spud is meant

to be eaten fresh and will reach consumers within days of harvest.

EMERALD ASH BORER UPDATE

Emerald ash borers (EAB) are serious pests from Asia that attack all species of ash trees by destroying the vessels that conduct water and nutrients. They are so aggressive, they can kill a tree in two to three years. So far, they have destroyed 16 million ash trees in Michigan, where EABs were found in 13 counties in 2002.

In spite of quarantines in Michigan, in Ohio counties, and in Windsor, Canada, where the EAB has also appeared and remains a serious pest, infestation is spreading to other parts of North America. In August 2003, the insect appeared in the Mid-Atlantic—in ash trees at a Maryland nursery. In spring 2004, the EAB was discovered in two Indiana counties.

“The threat is enormous. EAB is nastier than expected,” says Edith Makra, community trees advocate at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois. “They put



Morton Arboretum research assistant Eric Kotora secures a plastic strip on a tree to create a trap for emerald ash borers in Illinois's Lake County Forest Preserve District.

one in a wind tunnel and it flew six miles,” adds Makra.

Horticulturists at the Morton Arboretum aren't waiting for the insect to appear; they are taking a proactive approach.

“It's all about preparedness,” says Makra. With a grant from the Illinois Department of Agriculture, the arboretum has assembled a team of 40 area communities, green organizations, and state and federal agencies in a mere eight months to monitor the incidence of EAB in northeastern Illinois. EAB experts in the team are traveling throughout the region inspecting trees, identifying stressed specimens, and conducting follow-up observations to check for the presence of the insects.

“So far, we're clean, but it's not over yet,” says Makra, who adds hopefully, “if you're monitoring and surveying, you're ahead of the game.”

CELEBRATING LEWIS AND CLARK

Two hundred years ago, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark began their fabled voyage of discovery to the Pacific, departing from what would become Illinois on May 14, 1804. Beginning in 2003 and continuing into 2005, places all along their route to the Pacific—in Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oregon, and Washington—are celebrating the bicentennial of the Corps of Discovery expedition.

In addition to the many regional celebrations, a traveling exhibit, “Lewis and Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition,” opens on November 6, 2004, at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Academy already houses some 226 dried specimens collected by Lewis in its Lewis and Clark Herbarium.

Some of these herbarium specimens will be displayed along with the expedition artifacts that are part of the National Bicentennial Exhibition, which will be at the academy through March 20, 2005. For more information visit the academy's Web site at www.acnatsci.org.

KITCHEN GARDENERS CELEBRATE

Kitchen Gardeners International (KGI), with members in 35 countries, is an organization dedicated to celebrating home-grown, home-cooked foods produced in a healthier, more sustainable, and more pleasurable food system. To celebrate the “diversity of delicious foods...from our own backyards, both literally and figuratively,” KGI inaugurated Kitchen Garden Day on August 22, 2004.

“If some of the world's largest food companies can establish the entire month of February as ‘Snack Food Month’, home gardeners and cooks deserve their own day,” says KGI president Roger Doiron, who founded the organization when he realized there was a powerful connection between food and the “big picture” issues such as health and the environment.

To sign up for a free e-mail newsletter featuring profiles of gardeners from around the world along with their tips for growing vegetables and recipes, visit KGI's Web site, www.kitchengardeners.org.

PEOPLE and PLACES in the NEWS

'Big Boy' Breeder Dies

On June 25, 2004, Oved Shifriss, plant breeder, geneticist, and recipient of the 1993 AHS Luther Burbank award, died at the age of 89. As Director of Vegetable Research at the Burpee Seed Company, Shifriss developed the 'Big Boy' tomato in 1949 after years of breeding. It revolutionized tomato culture by enabling home gardeners to succeed at growing what had been a finicky crop. In Shifriss' honor, the Burpee Tomato Trial Gardens in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, were renamed Oved Shifriss Field at a dedication held this past September.

Arson Destroys Seed Bank

On August 4, a fire, later determined to be arson, destroyed the offices of Abundant Life Seed Foundation in Port Townsend, Washington. The Foundation makes available open-pollinated varieties for organic agriculture, distributes seed to the needy via the World Seed Fund, and stewards seed germplasm for future generations. The group's catalog seed inventory and World Seed Fund seed inventory were lost. Tax-deductible donations for rebuilding the World Seed Fund and the education and research programs may be sent to: ALSF, Box 772, Port Townsend, WA 98368.

Scotts Acquires Smith & Hawken

The Ohio-based lawn and garden giant Scotts Company, manufacturer of fertilizer and pesticide products such as Miracle-Gro, Ortho, and Roundup, has acquired Smith & Hawken, a well-known purveyor of plants and upscale garden goods that opened its first retail store in 1985. The company will remain headquartered in California says Smith & Hawken CEO Barry Gilbert. “We are thrilled we now have the Scotts Company resources, which will enable us to really grow the Smith & Hawken brand,” says Gilbert.

BENGHAL DAYFLOWER INVADERS THE SOUTH

Benghal dayflower (*Commelina benghalensis*), also called tropical spiderwort, is invading the American South. Present in the United States for seven decades and on the Federal Noxious Weed List since 1983, its population has recently exploded, smothering fields of cotton and peanuts.

Observed in only five Georgia counties in 1999, "by 2003 it was a moderate to severe pest in 29 counties in Georgia and occurred in over 50 Georgia counties," says Theodore M. Webster, a research agronomist with the USDA Agricultural Research Service in Tifton, Georgia. It is also considered a serious pest in Florida and has spread to North Carolina.

While increasing awareness of the weed may account for some of the apparent spread, "the importance and troublesomeness of this weed has definitely increased," says Webster. He speculates that inadequate pest management strategies are also abetting the increase. "Glyphosate-based pesticides," he says, "are not very effective on tropical spiderwort, offering less than 55 percent control."



Benghal dayflower, left, looks deceptively benign. In the photo above, USDA research agronomist Theodore Webster stands amid a Georgia cornfield that has been entirely overtaken by the plant, leaving only a few cornstalks to stand.

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