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GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

"A farmer who works intelligently is the civilized man"

Van Gogh

It's pea planting time in the Gedy Garden. We take green peas for granted today, just as we take almost all our vegetables for granted, but at one time peas were worth their weight in silver.

The pea originated in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and India about 1,000 years ago. They were darker than what we think of as the green pea. It was after the Norman Conquest when we hear of the pea that is familiar to us. The Normans noted that there were "green peas for Lent" stored at the Barking Nunnery. By 1536 green peas became popular in France and were very expensive because of their scarcity. By 1696 the royal court in France reported, "This subject of peas continues to absorb all others. Some ladies, even after having supped at the royal table, and well supped too, returning to their homes, at the risk of suffering indigestion, will again, eat before going to bed. It is both a fashion and a madness."

We know that Thomas Jefferson claimed that the pea was his favorite vegetable, but that is not surprising knowing his affinity for all things French. Some consider peas the nobility of the vegetable families. They are rich in nutrition, containing vitamins A, B₁, B₂, niacin, vitamin C, protein and carbohydrates, and rich in taste and flavor as well.

Lent is early this year. Lent began on Ash Wednesday, which was February 13th. The day before is known as Shrove Tuesday. Because it is the custom to consume rich foods on this day, it has become known as Fat Tuesday, although the word "Shrove" is derived from the custom of the confessing or shrivening sins. It is also called Confession Tuesday.

The word Lent is from the Anglo-Saxon word *Lencton*, which refers to the time and season when the days grow longer. Lent is forty days and ends on Easter Sunday. In the Christian church it is a time of self denial, fasting, almsgiving, spiritual growth, and preparation for the celebration of Easter.

There is a 400-year-old practice that takes place even today in parts of England that repeats the custom of pancake races. Women run a course with a frying pan, tossing and catching pancakes. I guess the one with the most pancakes wins.

We know that Samuel Pepys observed fasting because he wrote in his diary that in 1663 in England he had only sugar-sopps and fish for dinner, "it being Good Friday."

Landon Carter also observed the Lenten customs. In 1774, on Wednesday, February 16th, his diary records, "Yesterday being Shrove Tuesday Robin and his son went to eat pancakes at old Beales." Again in 1777 he wrote, "This it seems is Shrove Tuesday and though far from being a good day parents, children, and all must go to old Beale's to eat pancakes."

There are many references to Lenten dishes found in the cookbooks used in the colonies in the 18th century.

The Frugal Colonial Housewife by Susannah Carter, 1772, has some receipts for rich soups in Lent or for Fast Days. Among the receipts offered are some for crawfish soup, oyster soup, eel soup, brown soup, white soup, rice soup, turnip soup, and soup-meagre. Soup seems to be the main fare. Mary Randolph's cookbook adds more soups, including a green pea soup. It also includes Tansy pudding, which was associated with the Easter season. Tansies, as they were often called, were a dish which varied from herb omelets to quiche to bread puddings. They all contained the hard-to-digest herb, tansy. One receipt calls for the yolks of eight or ten eggs and the whites of three or four, tansy, fever few, parsley and violets mixed with vinegar, sugar and salt all fried together. There are some other receipts for tansy pudding that include roses, bread, and brandy. Some call for strawberry leaves, and then there is apple tansy. Tansy pancakes were a favorite Lenten fare in England.

An interesting Lenten receipt for pea soup came from the Receipt Book of John Nott in 1773. It contained such things as Marigolds, Borage, sorrel, artichokes, blanched and boiled chestnuts, and other vegetables and, of course, egg yokes.

How many colonial Virginians practiced fast and abstinence during Lent we cannot say, but if they were pious and practicing the teachings of what is written in the Book of Common Prayer for the established church of the colony of Virginia, then some of these dishes were being eaten during this season.

Janet Guthrie