

The View From HIGH FALLS GARDENS

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ORGANIC METHODS REVITALIZE GINSENG

As reported in the June 1995 edition of *ACRES USA*, *The Voice of Eco-Agriculture*, Wisconsin ginseng farmers are beginning to realize that chemical agriculture has debilitated the potency of cultivated ginseng and are turning to intensive organic farming methods to restore the tonic properties of the root.

As many HFG readers are already aware, wild American ginseng, *Panax quinquefolius*, has been harvested from our woodlands for at least three hundred years. Native Americans foraged for the root and sold it to the China trade.

Chinese herbalists have long valued American ginseng's properties as being complementary to the Asian variety. American ginseng is considered a Yin tonifier--cold, sweet and slightly bitter, with a Heart/Kidney/Lung organ system affinity. Asian ginseng, *Panax ginseng*, tonifies Qi, is also sweet and slightly bitter but its energetics are considered slightly warm, and has a Lung/Spleen affinity.

While American wild ginseng has become almost an endangered species from overharvesting and the clear-cutting of woodlands, the superior qualities of the wild root compared to the cultivated variety are reflected in their respective prices, about \$325 and \$25 per pound. The problems in ginseng cultivation are legion -- farmers cannot match the fertility of the forest floor ecosystem and the roots are highly susceptible to fungi and predators. The conventional response has been to use chemical fertilizers and fungicides but, as with all food crops, such practices have led to a further deterioration in the quality of the product. In the case of ginseng, one measure of quality is the percentage content of ginsenosides, believed (but not proved) to be the active ingredient.

Now, as reported by *ACRES*, a group of growers and environmental agronomists calling themselves the Wisconsin Ginseng Crop Improvement Project have decided to restore the quality of cultivated ginseng. Their methods include bioremediation of the soil and the use of organic fertilizers including foliar sprays. The idea is that healthier plants will be more resistant to fungus attacks.

Much is at stake -- in 1994 Wisconsin growers produced two million pounds of ginseng, over 90 percent of the nation's crop, most of which was sold to Asian traders.

'PHOENIX WHITE' BLOOMS IN PHILMONT

Two Chinese tree peonies made their debut in Philmont on May 18 by opening stunning, six-inch-wide white blossoms, single forms with large yellow and red stamens in the center. The plants arrived from China last October, were planted in the research plots of High Falls Gardens and weathered their first American winter (a strange, mild one) in a breeze.

The plants, the 'Phoenix White' cultivar of the wild woody species *Paeonia ostii*, were identified by Professor Hong Tao, a dendrologist (specialist in woody plants) with the Chinese Academy of Forestry in Beijing, as being the species used in the production of moutan or *mu dan pi*, the root bark of the tree peony which is used medicinally.

Paeonia suffruticosa is widely understood to be the Latin binomial for tree peonies, but Professor Hong believes that this term comprises a number of species. He has devoted a great deal of time to describing and differentiating them. *P. ostii* and three other species are described in his article published in the American Peony Society Bulletin, Number 282, in June of 1992.

The 'Phoenix Whites' were imported for HFG by David and Kasha Furman of Cricket Hill Garden in Thomaston, Connecticut. Cricket Hill is perhaps the only nursery in the U.S. devoted exclusively to Chinese, in contrast to Japanese, tree peonies. David explained that the Chinese, who have been cultivating tree peonies for at least a thousand years, prefer flower forms that Americans refer to as doubles, including bombs or "thousand petal" shapes, while the Japanese like the single or semi-double forms. Since most Americans' experience with tree peonies has been with Japanese cultivars, anyone making a visit to David and Kasha's annual Peony Festival held in mid-May in northwest Connecticut is in for a real treat. The plants are incredibly varied and exotic-looking. David and Kasha do a great job of describing the wide range of flower colors and shapes in their very attractive catalog, which may be obtained by writing Cricket Hill Garden, 670 Walnut Hill Road, Thomaston, CT 06787 or by phoning 203-283-1042.

IMPROVING YOUR DIET THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE WAY

Many people have discovered that the key to health is a diet centered around fresh, locally grown organic vegetables and herbs, supplemented by other high quality foods. Once we accept such an idea, however, one major problem remains -- how to do it. Changing a lifetime's worth of habits is hardly easy and, given the pressures of today's economy, the reality is that opportunities for proper home-cooked meals are scarce.

For practical suggestions on how to incorporate principles of healthy eating into daily life, we turned to three popular books on traditional Chinese nutrition, which include the use of herbs to correct imbalances in the body and prevent chronic degenerative disease. We're looking for ways to modify our current practices in the right direction, rather than attempting a draconian, comprehensive change that would most probably fail.

- Lu, Henry C., *Chinese System of Food Cures: Prevention and Remedies* (Sterling Publishing Co. Inc., 387 Park Avenue South, New York NY 10016, 1986), \$9.95.
- Ni, Maoshing and McNease, Cathy, *The Tao of Nutrition* (Sevenstar Communications Group, Inc., 1314 Second Street #208, Santa Monica, CA 90401, 1987), \$14.95.
- Flaws, Bob, *The Book of Jook: Chinese Medicinal Porridges* (Blue Poppy Press, 1775 Linden Avenue, Boulder CO 80304, 1995), \$16.95.

The three authors whose books we consulted (see above) are working in the classical Chinese tradition. Mr. Lu and Mr. Ni are both Taoists and their books are excellent general introductions to the concepts of traditional Chinese nutrition, but which also include many specific tips and recipes. Mr. Flaws is a Westerner who, with his wife Honora Wolfe, wrote a more general introduction to the subject in 1983, called *Prince Wen Hui's Cook: Chinese Dietary Therapy* (Paradigm Publications, Brookline, MA 02146). We're including his most recent book here because it specifically addresses one of the most challenging of our bad habits, that of the typical Western breakfast.

What the Chinese Know That Westerners Don't

Mr. Flaws cites the recent study conducted by Cornell and Oxford Universities in conjunction with the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine in Beijing, which found that 90% of the Chinese people studied still ate locally grown foods, had meat only about once per week, ate more calories per pound of body weight than Americans but are

much less obese, got 6-24% of their calories from fat compared to 39% for Americans and 45% for Britons, and whose cholesterol level averages only 127 mg per deciliter compared to an average of 212 in the U.S.

Mr. Lu compiles a sample menu of foods that yield complete nutrition according to the Western view, analyzes it according to both systems, and finds that it comes up short according to Chinese requirements. This we already know, that the Chinese system of medicine including nutrition, though highly unscientific from the Western point of view, recognizes factors necessary to health which are still unknown to science.

In his introduction, Mr. Lu points out that herbal cures for goiter, night blindness and beriberi were known in the 7th century A.D. Today Western medicine knows that iodine, Vitamin A, and Vitamin B-1 are the respective remedies for these diseases. However, those components are found in some, but not all, of the herbal remedies for those diseases, indicating that the Chinese approach is giving a fuller answer, albeit with unknown factors.

The Chinese Approach to Nutrition

As Mr. Ni quotes Confucius, "Eat not for the pleasure thou mayest find therein. Eat to increase thy strength. Eat to preserve the life thou has received from heaven." Confucius was something of a puritan, but we assume he was telling us not that we shouldn't enjoy food, merely that our choices must be well-founded. A gourmet, after all, appreciates variety. Traditional Chinese nutrition, Mr. Ni explains, taught people to choose foods according to the energies and properties of the food, the season of the year, method of preparation, geographic location, and natural principles of life and balance -- all of which can be learned. With practice, even Westerners who grew up eating Velveeta and Ring-Dings can learn to cure headaches and colds with food and to head off chronic degenerative disease. It's never too late for redemption!

All three books include discussions of the basic concepts of traditional Chinese nutrition. Mr. Ni does a very well-written summary in twenty pages. Mr. Lu creates a numerical scale of Yin and Yang, which for the more Cartesian readers may be good practice in evaluating all the factors such as season of the year, body type, etc. The basic idea is that foods are classified by flavors, energies, and direction of movement.

Foods are also listed with their specific actions (i.e., to relieve cough), along with handy little recipes and tips. For instance, in the *Chinese System of Food Cures* under Water Chestnuts, "Boil five water chestnuts in water with one fresh mandarin orange peel. Drink as a tea, three times daily, to relieve hypertension." And finally, there are lists of specific imbalances and maladies with a variety of appropriate food remedies underneath.

One reason it's useful to consult more than one book has to do with the way traditional medicine developed within physician clans in distinct geographic regions of China. This was a variety of traditions, rather than one tradition, and their heirs and descendants now practicing in the West (away from the leveling force of official Chinese state medicine) often do not agree on specifics. For instance, the classification of foods according to Yin-Yang principles is done slightly differently by each practitioner. Mr. Ni includes a table of the energetic properties of foods consisting of a cold-to-hot scale within each food group, but does not rank the food groups relative to each other. That is, he classifies both pork and banana as cold, but a beginner would not necessarily know that meat is far more Yang (hot) than any fruit. Yin and Yang have meaning only in relationship to each other. One needs to see a few of these charts before the meanings become clear.

A more sophisticated discussion of the traditional Chinese theories of digestion is found in Mr. Flaw's book. In the preface, he says that the book is intended for practitioners of TCM. However, we find it a good book for intermediate students and an excellent practice guide for those who are just starting to incorporate Chinese herbs into the diet. He adds only one or two herbs to his rice porridge recipes, so the combinations are actually very simple. Naturally, we would never advocate using herbs in this fashion for a long period of time without supervision from a practitioner.

Mr. Flaws gives a very specific answer to the problem of breakfast, the Achilles heel of the Western diet, in which everything we usually eat -- eggs, bacon, orange juice, waffles, cereal and milk -- is really disgusting from the traditional Chinese point of view. His answer is congee, a dilute rice porridge also called *zhou* (pronounced "jook" according to Flaws), along with vegetables and herbs. He thinks oatmeal porridge is fine, but too Dampening for people already too Damp. Needless to say, he doesn't like milk, butter, or sweeteners with the porridge, it defeats the purpose. However, he claims that he dropped six or seven pounds after converting to this rice porridge breakfast. He makes this stuff the night before, using a crockpot. All the details are in the book, including a list of sources for the herbs.

Mr. Flaws explains the Chinese concept of digestion in which food is turned into a 100-degree soup in the stomach. Therefore, the closer food is to a 100-degree soup to begin with, the more digestible it is, which makes hot rice porridge almost perfect. He tells exactly why sweets are bad (they overwhelm the Spleen, weaken it and cause Dampness), and makes an argument against wheat, saying that it is more Dampness-producing than rice, especially when in refined flour form. He quotes Li Dong Yuan's 12th-century *Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach*, in which Spleen deficiency and Dampness may become Damp Heat in the Lower Burner (Li's famous concept of Yin Fire), which describes many of the chronic degenerative diseases seen in the West today. Improper diet is the single most important factor in the progression of these diseases.

The Spleen and Stomach slow down at about age 35 so it becomes absolutely imperative to watch the diet to achieve a fit and healthy old age. Fat is seen as excess Phlegm and Dampness, the root of which is in the Spleen.

One of the features of Mr. Lu's book is a whole chapter devoted to weight loss. He agrees with recent Western medical evidence that the foundations for a tendency to obesity are laid in childhood. However, his explanation has more intuitive appeal than does discussion about fat cells. He introduces the concept of "overnourishment" -- we overnourish our digestive system at the expense of the heart, lung, kidney and liver systems. "A strong, imbalanced body is just as bad as a weak, balanced body." After being overnourished in childhood, the digestive system tends to work extra hard throughout adult life, making us fat.

This is also explained in terms of Five Element Theory, with the imbalance of the Spleen/Stomach weakening the Kidney/Urinary Bladder. "In short, we eat only to please the mouth and the stomach, which means to enjoy the taste and to gain weight as a result. This used to be good in the past when our stomachs were undernourished due to poverty, but now, in modern affluent society, it becomes bad." So he advocates including the four other tastes into daily cooking and gives sample recipes for a meat sauce and a beef soup that are balanced. He extols the value of green tea and adzuki beans for weight reduction.

Also, individual physical constitutions/body types are important, so we should eat foods appropriate for our body type. Mr. Lu claims that most obese people are damp, so the goal should be to make their bodies hot and dry. He likes the idea of "increasing the burning fire of the Kidneys" to help in weight loss, by eating animal organs and other Yang tonics, such as yam, raspberry and mussels. Our criticism of this approach is that it ignores the fact that most Americans are far too hot already, from a diet with too many Yang foods such as meat and dairy, not to mention preservatives and environmental toxins. We would prefer to reduce Dampness by strategies such as Draining.

Chinese Dietary Concepts in Practice

We lasted about two days on the rice porridge breakfast. True, we didn't use a crockpot, but even so concluded that -- even considering the tantalizing possibilities of weight loss -- this gruel is just too thin for us. Perhaps during illness, before fasting, or for actual dieting this would be more practical.

The theory is too good to abandon without a struggle, however. We started experimenting with other kinds of grain/vegetable combinations for breakfast. The Taoists believe that all beans and grains should be soaked overnight to activate their energies. So, already you're stuck with a two-step process of soaking and then cooking. This turned out to be only modestly difficult in practice, the real hang-up (let's admit it) is the taste.

Our preparation for this activists' book review then narrowed to a search for tasty grain/bean/vegetable breakfast combinations that would also be convenient for real working people to prepare.

The best cooked cereal, in our opinion, is Susan Middleton's Crunchy Oatmeal, a premixed assortment of roasted buckwheat, steel-cut oats, quinoa, rye flakes, corn grits, barley, millet, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, date pieces and raisins. We like to sweeten it with applesauce, walnuts or maple syrup. However, in warmer weather it's too heavy.

Using different foods seasonally makes a lot of sense. Most people notice a desire for more substantial, warming foods in winter and lighter, cooling foods in summer. For example, a summertime solution might be puffed kamut (a grain available in alternative food stores and co-ops) with soy milk. If the soy milk is in small aseptic packages it can be kept at room temperature, a plus for the Stomach (which does not "like" refrigerated food, in the traditional Chinese view). Aseptic packages are recyclable, by the way.

Also, whole grain rye crackers are a nice change from toast. They can be spread with nut butters, fruit spreads or tofu spreads. Leftovers can be great for breakfast, especially for those of us who do physical work and need something substantial but light to last until lunch. Lentil or adzuki bean dishes, barley or rice dishes, many types of salad can be eaten alone or stuffed into pita bread for convenience.

To eat vegetables for breakfast, try marinating cooked, diced root vegetables -- maybe in combination with fresh, raw onion, chives, cucumber or celery -- in a mild dressing. You can use equal parts tomato juice, lemon juice, water (or apple juice to make it sweeter), and olive oil. Add crushed garlic, celery seed, pepper and tamari to flavor the marinade. Of course, chopped fresh herbs will improve the flavor immensely. Then scoop it into pita bread and eat it on the run if necessary.

For more ideas on how to incorporate vegetarian meals in the diet, some of the new cookbooks by Westerners can provide excellent advice. Good breakfast ideas can be found in Annemarie Colbin's *The Book of Whole Meals* (Ballantine Books, New York, NY). The book is arranged by seasons and daily menus, and the recipes are for basic, simple, vegetarian food.

We also highly recommend Nikki and David Goldbeck's *American Wholefoods Cuisine* (Plume/Penguin Books, New York NY), and *Tofu Cookery* by Louise Hagler (The Book Publishing Company, Summertown, Tennessee).

Again, we want to emphasize that simply avoiding coffee and sugars (barley malt and rice syrups are okay) can make a huge difference in daily and long-term well being. These can be the first two steps in improving the SAD (Standard American Diet). ■

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The following are a couple of summer breakfast recipes that have worked for us.

Scrambled Tofu With Potatoes and Greens

2 C diced potatoes (½-inch cubes)
1 onion, diced
1 pound crumbled tofu
Herbs (i.e. lovage, thyme, chives, parsley, dill, basil)
Greens (i.e. chard, spinach, kale, mustard, broccoli rabe)
2 T oil
½ tsp curry powder
tamari and black pepper

Heat 1 T oil in a large pan with a lid. Saute potatoes over medium heat until they just begin to brown. Cover and continue cooking until tender (about 5 minutes).

Heat 1 T oil in a large skillet. Saute diced onion over medium heat until translucent. Add crumbled tofu and continue cooking while adding chopped fresh herbs. Add curry powder, black pepper and tamari to taste. Continue cooking until tender and soft, or longer until just beginning to brown.

Chop and steam greens separately. Arrange on a plate with the potatoes and tofu, or mix all three together and serve. Save leftovers for another meal.

Couscous and Vegetables

Couscous is finely cracked wheat that has been steamed and dried, making it highly digestible and therefore desirable as a breakfast food. Very quickly prepared, almost instant, it's light enough for summer.

To 1½-2 cups water or broth add:

½ C finely chopped onion
½ C grated carrot
½ C chopped mushrooms

Bring to a boil and add 1 C couscous. Return to a boil, cover and simmer over low heat for 5 to 10 minutes or until tender. More water can be used for a softer, moister texture.

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