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Etrog: A botanic story of sibling love

SUKKOT
By Carol Goodman Kaufman
Advocate columnist



The etrog trees
PHOTO: CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN

Like hundreds of thousands of Jews around the globe, we buy a lulav and etrog every Sukkot. As an experiment, I have several times planted the seeds of this fruit post-holiday with the hope of growing my own citron. Silly, really. After all, I live in the heart of New England, in a city that has more than once been featured on national television for its record-setting snowfall. Having an etrog here requires moving the tree out to the patio in late spring, then schlepping it back to the sunroom every fall before the cold weather can kill it. The fruit emits a divine citrus fragrance on a good day, but admittedly, on a bad one it can smell more like cleaning fluid.

Then there is the practical side of the fruit. Aside from the one to shake with a lulav and one to use as a sachet, what is one to do with a bushel of citron? Although it certainly is not among the most widely used of fruits, it turns out fans of this citrus have incorporated it in cakes, salads and candy. An intrepid group of women from my synagogue once managed to prepare – and even sell – etrog marmalade, a gooeey, sickly sweet concoction. My energetic rabbi makes a potent limoncello liqueur – or would that be citroncello?

Ten years ago, on my third try, I resolved to pay close attention to my agricultural project. We now have two lovely trees. How they came to be is a tale of true botanic love.

About two weeks after scooping the seeds from my etrog and carefully placing them in brand new potting soil, we noticed tiny green shoots popping out of the deep brown earth. Within a couple of months, we had three seedlings. After another few months, I threw out the runt of the litter and repotted the two heartiest plants. I placed them in opposite spots in the sunroom, about 12 feet apart. Within a week, one of the plants had begun to shrivel and turn brown, while the other was still green and healthy. Time for an intervention.

I brought them both onto the kitchen windowsill, where I could keep an eye on my charges. After about a week, the brown and shriveled plant began to revive. But neither of the plants was growing toward the sun, as is the habit of every other plant I have ever owned. They were growing toward each other, arching their tender, narrow stems in a manner suggesting that they were whispering in a secret language, reminiscent of twins who had once shared a crib.

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Sukkot



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PORTLAND, MAINE	5:55
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Jewish Guide to Boston and New England
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Both etrog trees are now healthy. They have grown branches and been repotted again. Like siblings, one is beginning to grow taller, while the other is a bit stouter, and both have been pruned several times to prevent their hitting the ceiling. They stand next to each other night and day, outdoors in summer, indoors in winter. They still lean toward each other, no matter how many times I rotate them toward the sun.

Every season, the two have produced lovely bunches of blossoms that emit a heavenly perfume. Their scent complements the citrus fragrance of the leaves. But still no useable fruit. Actually, a tiny citron did appear a couple of years ago. I visited it several times a day, kvelling and excitedly posting a photo on my Facebook page. Unfortunately, my helicopter parenting must have annoyed the tree, because one morning I found that the miniscule fruit had fallen – jumped? – off its branch.

Everything I have read about citron cultivation has warned me not to expect anything for at least seven years; and my kibbutz cousin, who grows exotic fruits, has told me that growing from seed will yield nothing important. Yet I remain hopeful, and patient. My optimism remains strong that we will be harvesting the bright yellow fruit someday. My recipes stand by ready for action.

Citroncello

A Jewish take on limoncello. *L'chaim!*

5-to-6 citrons, thoroughly scrubbed and dried
1 (750 ml) bottle 100-proof vodka
2 cups superfine sugar (if you don't have any, just zap some regular sugar in a food processor)
2 1/2 cups water

Pour 1/2 the vodka into a large glass jar. With a vegetable peeler or grater, remove yellow peel only, avoiding the white pith. Add the lemon zest directly to the jar. Cover the jar and let sit at room temperature for a full month.

After the first month:

In a large saucepan, combine the sugar and water. Cook, stirring frequently, until sugar is dissolved. Cool syrup before adding it to the vodka. Add the remaining vodka. Allow to rest for another month.

After the second month:

Strain the mixture, discarding the lemon zest. Pour into bottles. Place bottles in the freezer until ready to serve.

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