

Tu B'Shevat – the original Arbor Day: And a recipe for fruitcake that will never get re-gifted

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Millennia before Nebraskan J. Sterling Morton established America's National Arbor Day in 1872, the Jews had an annual New Year for Trees. While not a well-known holiday like Passover, Tu B'Shevat is in fact one of four different New Years commemorated in the Jewish calendar. The other three are celebrated with the new moon, as Judaism follows a lunar calendar. Tu B'Shevat alone is observed in the middle of the month, the 15th, when the moon is full. Since the letters of the Hebrew alphabet also serve as numbers, the word "Tu" is actually an acronym made from the letters equaling 15.

So, while our timbers will still be shivering when we New Englanders celebrate the holiday on Jan. 28, the pink-and-white blossoms of the almond tree will begin to bloom in the Holy Land, indicating that spring is springing. (FYI, our National Arbor Day is commemorated on the last Friday in April, presumably when temperatures have warmed a bit.)

Tu B'Shevat was originally designated in the Talmud around the year 200 CE for the purpose of calculating the age of trees, both for harvesting and tithing purposes. The Torah prohibits fruit from being eaten during the first three years of a tree's growth, but on Tu B'Shevat the first fruits of the fourth year are consumed, as well as samples of all seven species mentioned in the Torah (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates).

As with the American National Arbor Day, it is customary to plant trees on Tu B'Shevat, and the Jewish National Fund has planted over 240 million of them in Israel since its inception in 1901.

The holiday evolved into something broader in the 16th century when Kabbalists in Safed developed a ritual meal called a seder. Participants in a seder read spiritual meditations and taste anywhere from 10 to 30 different fruits and nuts mentioned, all with symbolic meaning. The first group of fruits and nuts have hard shells that represent the physical world for which protection from



Seven Species Muffins [SUBMITTED PHOTO]

evil is necessary. Fruits with inedible stones represent a lesser level of purity in that they recall both physicality and inner emotions that need protection. The third group consists of completely edible fruits, such as figs. They stand for the highest level of physical and spiritual perfection.

And what would a celebration be without wine? Seder participants consume wines ranging from pure white to solid red that symbolize both the changing of the seasons and the stages of creation. I would recommend drinking the wines only after planting, or your trees may lean like that tower in Pisa.

In modern times the holiday has developed yet again into an ecologically-minded one, featuring education and advocacy that teaches of our connection to and responsibility for the environment, and of our role as caretakers of the Earth. Coincidentally, vegetarianism has grown concomitantly with the popularization of the holiday.

Seven Species Muffins

Makes 9 large muffins

It is a land of wheat and barley; of grapevines, fig trees, and pomegranates; of olive oil and honey.
Deuteronomy 8:8

This fruitcake-like muffin is one that will never get re-gifted. Including all seven of the biblical species, this bread is not only healthy, with lots of fiber, it is absolutely delicious.

Ingredients:

- 1½ cups flour
- ½ cup barley flour
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon allspice
- 1 cup unsweetened almond milk (you can use regular milk if you don't have this)
- 2 tablespoons pomegranate molasses
- ¼ cup applesauce
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- 1/5 cup light olive oil
- 1½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¾ cup raisins
- ½ cup dried figs (Mission figs are probably easiest to work with)
- ½ cup dates (I prefer the Medjool variety)
- ½ cup chopped almonds, toasted lightly
- Nonstick cooking spray – the kind with flour

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. and coat muffin tins pans with cooking spray.

In a large mixing bowl, mix together flour, barley flour, sugars, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon and allspice.

Roughly chop dates and figs (removing the pits and tough stems first). Mix with raisins and almonds. Set aside.

Beat eggs and combine with almond milk, oil, applesauce, pomegranate molasses and vanilla extract.

Make a well in the middle of the dry ingredients. Add the egg mixture, stirring well.

Mix in the fruits and nuts and fold until just incorporated.

Pour batter into the prepared muffin tins.

Place pans in the oven and bake for 25-30 minutes, or until a toothpick/cake tester inserted into the center comes out clean.

Adapted from one by Tori Avey