

## *Sweet September*

By Kim Smith

Sweet September, achingly beautiful, and made more so, knowing the cooler weather will soon be upon us. Although I am partial to Cape Ann, is there any New England community that is not bathed in beauty during September? By late afternoon, the surrounding seascape is enwrapped in a haze of softly angled sunlight and the garden is shrouded in a gilded golden glow. Balmy breezes murmur through the trees muting the chorus of crickets. After putting in a day's work and before dinner we head for a swim. Lately the temperature of the ocean water has been walk-in warm. My husband invariably remarks how fortunate we are to live so close to the water to take a swim nearly every day, and I think of the light and sea and the unconscious beauty in which we are enfolded. But this year, I feel only a twinge of melancholy at summer's end. My book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! Notes from a Gloucester Garden* will soon be out in the world. Imagine...I wrote the first draft in the year 2000, longhand, before we had acquired a computer. Such great joy in creating and I hope you will find it so. *Oh Garden* will be available to purchase by mid-October.

Abundant rainfall this summer brought a bounty of fruits and vegetables. This week we are harvesting the 'Belle of Georgia' peaches. The sweetly fragrant, succulent, white-fleshed fruits make a delicious morning smoothie—peach, strawberry, and fresh mint are a particular family favorite. What to do with a bumper crop? Peaches are very easy to freeze. To remove the skins, dip the peaches into a large pot of boiling water for approximately 45 seconds to a minute. Remove with a slotted spoon and then plunge into a bowl of ice-cold water for several minutes. For the most part, the skins will slide off. Slice the peaches in halves or quarters and cut out brown or mushy spots. Toss with freshly squeezed lemon juice. Immerse the peaches in light sugar syrup and store in Ziploc freezer bags. To make the sugar syrup, combine one cup sugar to three cups water, which will cover approximately three quarts of fruit.

Take the time now to freeze herbs with fleshy foliage—chives and nasturtium, for example. Freeze, dry, or make pesto with fresh basil leaves. Harvest and dry the savory leaves of thyme, tarragon, parsley, and mint. We use recycled jam jars to store dried herbs. The task at hand is most enjoyable, and the volatile oils best captured, when done early in the morning, after the dew has evaporated and before the sun becomes hot.

With the host of plants we provide for the pollinators at this time of year blooming, and re-blooming—annual herbs, Japanese anemones, Spanish poppies, spiderwort, copious members of the Asteraceae, and nasturtiums, to name but several—there are no lack of bees, in sheer number or variety. Perhaps because they find nourishment and safe harbor (no pesticides, ever!), beginning in early March. The richly scented Japanese andromeda (*Pieris japonica*) begins its florescence at the first hint of spring and is Mecca for all manner of bees. The bee in the photo was traveling laboriously, laden with propolis (the waxy orange substance attached to the rear legs). Foraging from blossom to blossom, his pollen baskets had the appearance of bulging carpetbags. A bee's legs are very versatile. The last segments have both claws for gripping and soft pads for walking on smooth surfaces. The corbicula, or pollen basket, is located on the tibia of the last pair of legs. Its concave shape, edged with fine hairs, keeps the propolis safe while the bee is flying. When too many pollen grains get stuck on a bee's antenna, there is an appendage on the front legs, fittingly called the "antenna cleaner."

Florentine fennel, also called sweet fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare azoricum*) makes a fabulous addition to the herb garden or back of the mixed flower border as it is simply gorgeous at this time of year. Five feet tall, with feathery fronds of foliage and umbels of gay yellow florets, the bulbs of sweet fennel can be harvested anytime after they begin to bulge. Do not harvest all the bulbs; save several plants to collect the seeds. Cut the seed heads from the plant when they are swollen and just beginning to turn brown and place in a paper bag. After the seeds fall off into the bag, spread on a wire-mesh tray until they are completely dry. Store in an airtight container. Fennel seed may be used as a savory seasoning or added to baked goods.

#### Oven Roasted Potatoes Sweetened with Caramelized Fennel and Onions

1 fennel bulb, thinly sliced  
2-3 medium onions, thinly sliced  
6-8 medium-sized potatoes with delicate skin, Yukon Gold or Red Bliss, for example  
3-4 Tbs. olive oil  
1 Tbs. thyme  
Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Caramelize the onions and fennel together in olive oil. While the onions and fennel are cooking, wash and slice the potatoes very thinly, roughly 1/8 of an inch thick. Pat dry. In a large bowl combine the potatoes, onions, and fennel. Drizzle olive oil over the mixture, stir, then add the thyme, salt and pepper. Toss with your hands until thoroughly coated. Spread evenly on a baking sheet, no deeper than 2-3 slices thick. Bake 30-35 minutes until golden and crispy, stirring every ten minutes or so, to bring the layers underneath towards the surface so all will brown evenly.

***Come join me Saturday, September 13th, at 11:00 am for “On the Wing: Migratory Butterflies.” I will be giving a presentation and walk through the beautiful botanic gardens at the Arnold Arboretum. To register, you may call the Arboretum at 617.384.5251. If you have any further questions, please don’t hesitate to email or call me. I hope to see you there!***



