

It's been quite a week here. We've gotten more snow in the last week than we got all last winter! The schools and a lot of businesses were even closed one day. But here in the Meadows house, we've got a glimpse of spring...

Remember those Tulips, Daffodils and Hyacinths that I planted indoors several weeks ago? Well, they've started to bloom and let me tell you, it's a like a bit of heaven. The bright cheerful colors, the wonderful fragrance of springtime... all in the middle of this snowstorm. They'll last through the holidays too - just have to make sure that I turn the container a 1/4 turn each week so they'll grow nice and straight. Keeping them watered is important too.

Once they're done with their show, I'll cut off the flowers and set the container in the back room so it'll keep cool. They'll need water and some fertilizer until the leaves turn yellow. Then I can let the soil dry out, lift them and store them next to my prized Japanese Iris there in the basement. My dog Sally will be able to help me pick out a good spot in the garden for them when the ground thaws (she seems to have a talent for that!). Since they've already given us flowers this year, they probably won't bloom again until next spring. And at my age, I tend to be a bit forgetful about what I planted where, so they'll be a nice surprise!

Hyacinths and Daffodils aren't the only good smells around here today though. Sarah is in the kitchen cooking up batches of her tasty Fruit Nut Bread. She always bakes up a bunch of loaves to give to special neighbors and friends for the holidays. And you know Sarah - she doesn't just wrap up a loaf in cellophane and stick on a bow - she makes them into a right pretty present. She'll take a wicker basket, add a cloth napkin in holiday colors, then fill it with her Fruit Nut Bread, a small jar of her strawberry jam and some of that herbal tea that our daughter Laura makes.

People sure look forward to Sarah's holiday basket. Even Farley Sworn, the meanest man in town, gave her a big smile when she took him one. You see, Sarah had just watched that Grinch special with the grandkids, and decided that old Farley just needed a taste of Christmas spirit. Maybe now he'll soften up that rock garden of his with some more flowers!

That indoor herb garden I planted for her this year is proving very useful. Not only did we have a very flavorful Thanksgiving feast, she's using it to whip up some presents. Our son Tom loves to cook, so she's making him some flavored vinegar and oil to use in his special recipes. She had found some neat old bottles when we were out "garage-sale-ing" last summer, so she cleaned them out really well and bought some new corks down at Summerdale Hardware.

I sat in the kitchen with a cup of tea and wrote out the labels for her to put on the bottles. She added a few sprigs of dill to four cups of white vinegar to make a "secret ingredient" for cold salads and dips. Then she took four cups of olive oil and added a few chili peppers and about a quarter cup of garlic cloves and basil.

She tells me that this makes a spicy oil that's great for salad dressings and marinades. Since I'm about as bad in the kitchen as I am good at gardening, I'll have to take her word for it!

She'll let the bottles rest for a week in the basement - it's cool and dark down there, then check to see if they're cloudy. If they are, she'll just need to strain them and add some fresh flavorings. Then they'll be all set to get their labels and a fancy bow.

For the girls, she put together some bath bags. She chose lemon balm for Jill and mint for Laura. She put the herbs and a handful of oatmeal on a piece of cheesecloth and tied it up tightly with a ribbon. Purple for Jill, blue for Laura - those are their favorite colors. According to Sarah, all they'll have to do is drop them in a hot tub and it'll be like they're at one of those fancy spas. Hmm, maybe I'll have to drop one of those in old Sally's bath next time - wonder if there are any herbs that can make an English Bulldog smell good?

Well, I'm going to leave Sarah to her doings here in the kitchen. I've had that nice cup of tea and a delicious slice of her Fruit Nut Bread. Time for me and Sally to sit by the fire, close our eyes, and smell the wonderful fragrance of springtime from those Hyacinths. As we drift off into our nap, I'm sure we'll both be dreaming of summer days in the garden.

Sarah's Fruit Nut Bread

1/2 cup dried apricots
2 cups flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 large orange
boiling water
1/2 cup raisins
1 cup sugar
2 tablespoons butter, melted
1 egg, beaten
1/2 cup walnuts, cut fine
1 teaspoon vanilla

Cover apricots with water (about 1 cup); soak half an hour. Sift flour and measure, sift again with salt, baking powder and soda. Squeeze juice from orange into a cup and set aside. Put apricots, orange rind and raisins through coarse blade of food processor. Add enough boiling water to orange juice to make one cup, then pour over ground fruit. Add sugar and melted butter and mix

well. Add beaten egg and blend. Add sifted dry ingredients, stirring until just combined. Then stir in nuts and vanilla. Pour batter into a greased loaf pan (9" x 5" x 2 3/4"). Bake at 300 F for one hour, then remove from pan and place on rack to cool.