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**I hope for a semi-dwarf, fruited plain**

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The first week in February is a good time to fantasize.

Much of the country and perhaps 100 million Americans are wrestling with a blizzard that brought heavy snow, sleet, slush and slop. The storm “iceolated” about 30 states.

My patch of Virginia usually jumps into these frolics head first. Snowy Mountain, at whose foot we sit, has rarely met a lousy weather event that it didn’t embrace like a found fortune. We are as wintry as southern Vermont, and just as prickly.

My first act this week, of course, was to renew my public call for abolishing February. The plan is to part it out and put its days to better use in June and October.

On a more personal level, I found refuge in the nursery catalogs.

I wandered from fruit to fruit, photo to photo. Huge clusters, intense colors. Cherries, the spit-shine red of old fire engines. Blueberries, like North Carolina skies. Apricots so golden that they must have been lifted from Fort Knox.

As a writer, I feel that I’m inoculated against the persuasiveness of overwritten prose...except for that which spouts full-blown from the fountain of my own now-virtual bottomless pen and splatters me with the long-lost purple hues of those legendary ink-stained wretches from the distant and not-that-lamented past.

But who can resist “sweet & spicy”; “melting, fine-grained juicy flesh”; “crispy-crunchy flesh rich in flavor”; “glossy, plump and firm”? The fruit-tree boys appear to draw inspiration from 19th-Century bordellos.

Catalogs feed my weakness for deferred self-indulgence. I find dreaming about perfect fruit an arm’s reach away as satisfying as the thought of winning a \$100-million lottery.

I know there are people who can plant mail-order nursery stock and get bushels of portrait-ready fruit. I know that perfection is not beyond human grasp. I know that my friend, Harrison Willis Elkins, produces honey so good that you just sit in a stupor licking it off your paws straight from the jar like Winnie the Pooh.

To join with Nature to create something that wonderful requires a competence that combines knowledge, experience, persistence, effort and instinctive knack. I lack all of these qualities. My interest flags after digging and planting.

For that reason, I like nothing more than to eat an above-average apple from a tree I’ve planted and then neglected. No plastic packaging. No washing. No stupid little stickers I have to scratch off. This one apple is a triumph of Nature and nursery engineering over my multiple character flaws.

I have realistic overall expectations of the fruit trees I plant. Ninety-nine percent of whatever appears will be stunted, stubby and grubby. But I also know that one of every 100 will be great...and maybe even two or three. That’s winning the lottery in my book. Well...it’s a very small lottery and an even smaller book.

We live pretty large out here on Snowy Mountain in February.

The winter catalogs raise our hopes for the future, and it’s best for all concerned that we not be disappointed in how things turn out.

I once had supper with friends of my parents who described their children -- my contemporaries -- in dismissive terms. One of the kids worked for a non-profit, do-good outfit; another taught elementary school; the third was a social worker. None made much money.

After listening to their thumbnail life histories, I said: "You must be very proud of your kids." The mother blinked and finally managed: "Well, certainly, we are." But her choked-down disappointment rang louder in the silence that followed than her perfunctory affirmation. She was, I thought, looking at the wrong fruit.

Not being disappointed with how the future develops is different than having low expectations going in. Low expectations is a prescription for total failure. Not being disappointed with the basket of outcomes means valuing what did work amid what didn't.

Not being disappointed is finding the one that turned out fine despite everything you did wrong or didn't do at all.

If the catalog trees I've ordered are a fraction as good as their descriptions, I will be more than satisfied years from now with a nice one here and maybe even a little better one there.

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