Fennel

recently a delicatessen proprietor moved to our area from Staten Island. When I saw a huge jar of fennel seed on his counter top, I asked him if he ever used wild fennel seeds. He said no, but asked that if I had some wild fennel, to dig him some of the roots. He loves those above all else. This was the first time I had heard of using fennel roots. I always add a piece of fennel leaf when I am baking fish, and my Italian neighbor uses a lot of fennel seed when he is making sausage, so now it seems that the whole plant is of use to someone.

Fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*, a member of the carrot family, Umbelliferae, is not native to this country. But, originally cultivated, it has escaped and become naturalized in waste lands and along roadsides, growing abundantly in the southern states, and sporadically northward to southern New England.

Fennel has a very fine, feathery leaf which sprouts in the late spring and wilts instantly upon picking. In the late summer, the plants send up immensely tall flower stalks which bloom with characteristic dark yellow umbels. The seeds dry out on the flower stalks and gradually fall off in late autumn.

I am always a little sad when I read about a plant which thrives in my pasture, and find that it “frequents waste places.” I cherish the hope that my pasture is worth something a little better than the designation “waste place” but I must admit that there are some very fine weeds there. And actually we encourage the fennel, by omitting to cut it when we mow the other weeds. This is only because it is a fine herb. Fennel is one of the preferred food plants for caterpillars of swallowtail butterflies, and we would rather have a good population of swallowtails than totally weedfree pastures.

I have been accused of overdoing the fennel when I cook, but I have just found the perfect retort. John Evelyn, writes in his “Acetaria: or a Discourse on Sallets” in 1706, that the eating of fennel flowers and seeds “re-creates the brain”—so I no longer mind how much I put with the fish!