

Rhubarb— a root for all seasons?

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by Lydia Lovell



on top of the ground until they freeze solid. Freezing seems to increase their productivity.

“Then they are placed in a dark cellar, either on the floor or on shelves, or in a box, and covered lightly with earth. With an occasional watering, and by keeping the temperature about 60°, the stalks will be ready for cutting in about four weeks. A two-year-old root will produce four to five pounds of stalks; one four to five years old will produce six or seven pounds.

“The stalks are more tender and more delicate in flavor than when grown in the open ground; the leaves are smaller, and the stalks a more attractive red.”

Only by experimenting with a few roots of rhubarb, dug up late this fall, and by following instructions, can the truth be discovered about growing a winter crop of rhubarb. Would it be worth trying? For those who hanker for rhubarb pie in January, it probably would be.

Should the method prove successful, and you find yourself emerging from your cellar some cold morning with a fat bundle of rhubarb stalks, here are a few ways to convert their crisp tartness into fine edibles.

This recipe for **Menemsha Rhubarb Pie** must have come to

Aunt Olivia from across the Sound; one branch of her family was lured over to Martha's Vineyard during the height of whaling days. The Lovells occasionally got together with those cousins and kept in touch with them by mail. I like to think of the ladies sitting and sharing recipes around the dining room table after a company dinner had been prepared and consumed, and after the menfolk had repaired to the bar for a smoke and a discussion of politics and the latest in agricultural techniques.

To make **Menemsha Rhubarb Pie**, prepare a good two-crust pie dough and line a deep Pyrex pieplate with pastry. Mix together 1¼ cups sugar and 1 T. flour; sprinkle one-third of the mixture evenly over the bottom crust.

Wash, peel, and cut rhubarb stalks in half-inch lengths. Scatter enough into the pieplate to half fill it; sprinkle on another third of sugar/flour. Add additional rhubarb to form a gentle mound, but don't overfill; if you do, the juicy fruit will boil out and mess up your oven. Add the rest of the sugar and flour. Top with six or eight pieces of butter “the size of a meadowlark's egg.” Since I never found an egg of the meadowlark, I don't know how big one is, so I slice off half a dozen generous patties from a stick of butter and distribute them evenly.

Roll out the top crust. In a teacup, blend a tablespoon of margarine with one of butter, and spread over the rolled pastry, then dust with flour. Roll very lightly with rolling pin. Make slits for escaping steam. Moisten the edge of the lower crust with cold water, flip on top crust, butter side up, and press edges together with a fork before trimming off excess pastry. Sprinkle top generously with cold water. Bake in preheated oven at 400°, 40 to 45 minutes.

Aunt Olivia had her own recipe for Rhubarb Meringue Pie, one the Lovell's were particularly partial to because we preferred meringue to pastry on top. Aunt Olivia cooked both crust and filling before assembling this pie.

Boil 3½ cups fresh cut up rhubarb pieces with ¾ cup sugar for a few minutes. Add a pinch of salt. For a ten-inch pie, separate two eggs. Beat the yolks well, then stir in ½ C. sugar blended with 3 teaspoons cornstarch. Add one tablespoon cold water. Then pour into boiling rhubarb, stirring constantly until juice clears and thickens. When sauce is cooked, pour into a baked pie crust.

For the meringue, beat the egg whites stiff, but not dry, beat in 2 T. sugar and one teaspoon cream of tartar. Spread meringue over pie filling, carrying the egg whites to the edge of crust so meringue won't shrink while baking. Brown ten to fifteen minutes in 350° oven, watching the last five minutes to be sure meringue doesn't burn. Allow to cool in a draft-free location before serving.

Plain old-fashioned rhubarb sauce, a fine spring tonic, may be as efficacious in January as it is in March. Chop up a pint or so of rhubarb. Boil with a cup of sugar, adding only enough water to prevent burning. Pour into a bowl to cool. Refrigerate until ready to serve. Like applesauce, rhubarb is good with pork. The Lovells like a saucerful for dessert, plain, or with a big dollop of vanilla ice cream.

If you attempt growing rhubarb from roots in your cellar this winter, I wish you success. I haven't tried it, myself. If the experiment is a gigantic flop, little has been lost. Your rhubarb probably needs thinning anyhow. These recipes will come in just as handy next May or June as they will in January or February.

Maybe you'll find a sturdy big old book full of useless information and start a collection of memorabilia, recipes, and inspirational items of your own. It's something you can do while watching television on a winter's night. And maybe a generation of 2075 will find yours as fascinating as we do those in the book purchased in 1875. Aunt Olivia's old scrapbook is one of our family's most prized possessions.