



Local Harvest

Foodlink Waterloo Region • Issue 13 • May 2005

Features

Farm Profile:
Our Country Garden

Fresh in Focus:
Taking Stalk of
Rhubarb

Buying Rhubarb in
Waterloo Region



FOODLINK
218 Dawson St.
Waterloo, ON
N2L 1S4
(519) 747-7641

www.foodlink.ca

**Local Harvest
content, layout and
editing:**

Peter Katona

Carmen Everest-Wahl

Nina Bailey-Dick

Wendy Koch

Local Farm Profile: Our Country Garden

(2005 Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map Listing # 43)

If country-fresh fruit and produce is your thing, one local farm that bears checking out this season is Our Country Garden—just East of Cambridge. Set amidst a wooded area in the South East corner of Waterloo Region, Our Country Garden has been dubbed “the hidden jewel” by regular customers.

Linda and Greg Zamecnik have been working hard over the past 5 years to convert this small parcel of land into a berry picker’s paradise. Pasture and hay fields have given way to well ordered rows of strawberries. The one and a half acre raspberry patch with canes staked and tied resembles a tidy vineyard. The pumpkins and gourds have their place. Even the large rhubarb patch has a well cultivated feel to it.

When the Zamecnik family purchased the 20 acre property in 2000, they were fulfilling a



The Zamecnik Family: Linda & Greg, Colin & Leisha

dream to return to the land and farming. Both Linda and Greg grew up on farms and had missed the country life-style while living and working in the city. They were also keen to have their two children (Leisha and Colin) have a similar rural up-bringing and a chance to appreciate where their food comes from.

Their property couldn’t be better suited for a market garden operation. A combination of good silt loam soil and adequate drainage make for good berries, however it’s the location—just 5 minutes off the 401—that makes all the difference in the world. Our Country Garden is a very convenient destination whether you’re bringing the kids out to pick a few strawberries, or to stop by for a couple of quarts of pre-picked raspberries—on the way home from work or on the way up to the cottage.

While the location is great for bringing out first time customers, it’s the dedication to quality that keeps them coming back. It takes a lot of effort to grow top quality produce and the entire Za-



Rows of rhubarb

continued on page 2



Local Farm Profile continued

mecnik family is involved in the work. Planting and weeding, laying out irrigation pipes, staking and taping each and every raspberry cane, picking berries, managing the on-farm store, it all adds up to an enormous commitment. Talking to Linda however, you get the feeling it's a "labour of love" and that the whole family takes pride in the result. The Zamecnik's are kept busy from the early "spring scramble" until well into the fall. Their season starts with rhubarb as their first crop, followed by strawberries in June, raspberries, grape tomatoes and peas in July and August, and ending up with pumpkin and gourds into October.



Linda checking on rhubarb

Although they've got a good selection of crops, they're perhaps best known for their berries. They offer customers the choice of "u-pick" and "pre-picked" strawberries and raspberries in season. Although many customers enjoy coming out to pick berries, the "pre-picked" side of the business is really growing, even accommodating wholesale clients. With such an emphasis on quality, everyone who is involved in picking strawberries and raspberries must first pass Linda's "school of picking". To ensure pre-picked orders get to the customer in perfect condition, the berries themselves must be handled minimally. According to Linda, you should barely touch a raspberry. Proper picking is almost an art form, allowing individual berries to "pop off" gently into the container. Besides handling, managing a berry patch means you also have to have one eye constantly on the weather. Any moisture whatsoever will delay berry picking whether it be a heavy dew or light rain. The unpredictability of the weather is Linda's major source of frustration as days of picking can be lost due to rain. Despite the weather, the Zamecniks are able to provide a consistent supply of top quality

fruit—and when it comes to berries it really is best to look closer to home. As Linda points out, "quality berries aren't built to travel!"

With all the challenges associated with berries, it's little wonder that Linda & Greg have a section of land devoted to rhubarb which is usually an easier crop to manage. An Our Country Garden specialty is the patch of "Crimson" Rhubarb—a unique variety prized for its sweetness and more tender texture. Customers have grown to appreciate this rhubarb and find that it makes a perfect complement to the berries—in jams, pies and other favourite desserts.

Another aspect of their business that is growing rapidly is the frozen product. Fresh picked berries and rhubarb that aren't immediately sold are frozen. By freezing in single layers (on cookie sheets) they ensure that the berries don't stick together in the bag. This allows the customer to use them in small portions rather than thawing out the entire package. Linda has noticed that the frozen berries sell well, even in the peak of the fresh berry season.

Frozen berries and rhubarb can be purchased from the farm store, a converted barn which has been decorated with country flair. Along with fresh and frozen fruit, you can also purchase a variety of jams and preserves. No matter what customers are looking for, when they visit the store, they're sure to feel welcome. Linda and family really enjoy talking to and getting to know their customers—and it's a good thing, as their customer base is growing. At this rate, this "local jewel" won't be hidden much longer!

Be sure and try out Linda's easy recipe for Strawberry & Rhubarb pie on page 4 of this issue! 🍓

Finding Local Rhubarb

If you're looking for fresh spring rhubarb with its tangy zip, why not consult Foodlink's Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map. The new 2005 edition features a number of farms close by that grow and sell this seasonal treat. It's usually a good idea to call ahead.



Barrie's Asparagus
1236 Kings Rd., Cambridge
Tel. 621-9409



R & A Harris Farm Produce
394 Charles St. East, Maryhill
Tel. 648-3364



Floralane Produce
2191 Arthur St., Elmira
Tel. 669-3167



Woodside Country Farm Produce Market
770 Hawkesville Rd., St. Jacobs
Tel. 664-2764



Our Country Garden
1867 Shellard Rd., Cambridge
Tel. 740-8120





Taking Stalk of Rhubarb

Rhubarb. The word makes you pucker up just thinking about it. Yet its pucker-power is exactly what makes rhubarb, or “pie plant”, such a favorite spring-time treat. To winter-weary gardeners, rhubarb is es-



pecially appreciated because it is one of the first edibles to be picked, and its red stems and large, almost tropical leaves remind us of the bounty summer will soon provide for us.

Rhubarb is a plant name for the many different species of *Rheum*, growing wild in the mountains of the western and north-western provinces of China and neighbouring Tibet. The earliest records date back to 2700 BC in China where rhubarb was cultivated for its medicinal purgative properties. According to Lindley's Treasury of Botany, the

technical name of the genus (*Rheum*) is said to derive from Rha, the ancient name of the Volga, on whose banks the plants grow. The Middle English word *rubarbe* derived from Middle French *reubarbe*, which itself evolved from Medieval Latin *reubarbarum*, an alteration of *rha barbarum*, or more literally, “near the river of the barbarians”. Not being native to the Americas, enterprising colonists imported rhubarb seed or root stock from Europe into the country within the period 1790-1800. The cool Canadian climate has made rhubarb a favourite backyard garden plant for generations.

Rhubarb is a vegetable with a unique taste that makes it a favorite in many pies and desserts. It was initially cultivated for its medicinal qualities, and it was not until the 18th century that rhubarb was grown for culinary purposes in Britain and America. Rhubarb is often commonly mistaken to be a fruit but rhubarb is actually a close relative of garden sorrel, and is therefore a member of the vegetable family. One of the traditional bibles of cookery, *Joy of Cooking*, states rather emphatically that “Only by the wildest stretch of the imagination can rhubarb be included in this [fruit] chapter, but its tart flavor and its customary uses make it a reasonable facsimile, when cooked, of fruit.”

There are several different varieties of rhubarb grown all over the world and used in a variety of cooking preparations. One characteristic consistent with all rhubarb is the toxicity of the leaves and roots. The rhubarb leaves contain high amounts of oxalic acid, a toxic and potentially deadly poison. Only the stems are edible, although the original crops were grown for the round pouch of unopened flowers, which is still cooked as a delicacy in northern Asia.

Growing Rhubarb in the Backyard Garden

Rhubarb likes to grow in full sun or light shade in fertile, well-drained soils that are high in organic matter and slightly to moderately acidic. Rhubarb responds well to fertilizers, especially composted manure that helps to conserve moisture, preserves the soil structure, and makes nutrients readily available. An application of composted manure or leaves is beneficial in late fall and early winter, but not over the crowns as this may promote rotting.

Rhubarb is a cool season, perennial plant that is very winter hardy and resistant to drought. Its crop is produced from crowns consisting of fleshy rhizomes and buds. Following a season of growth, the rhubarb crown becomes dormant and temperatures below 5°C are required to stimulate bud break and subsequent growth. The first shoots to appear in the spring are edible petioles (stems). These emerge sequentially as long as temperatures remain cool. As temperatures increase, top growth is suppressed, even appearing dormant in periods of extreme heat. With declining temperatures in later summer, foliage growth resumes.

During the first year of planting, the stalks should not be picked, since food from the leaves is needed to nourish the roots for the next year's growth. One light picking may be taken during the year following planting if the plants are vigorous, and beginning the second year following planting, the entire plant may be harvested. When harvesting rhubarb, wait until the leaves are fully developed or nearly so. Pull the stalks away from the base of the crown (like pulling a stalk of celery off the bunch), and then snap it off at the bottom. Avoid cutting stems with a knife, as rot can set in.

The time of harvest is dependent upon the variety as well as on the location and temperature. Generally, harvesting begins in late May or early June, with an option of



a second harvest made in late August. If seedstalks and flowers develop during the spring and summer, cut them from the base of the plant as soon as they appear and discard them.

Established clumps will have to be divided every 4 to 5 years to help the plant grow thick stems. This is done by digging around and trimming the crown down to 4 or 5 buds in early spring. Once planted, rhubarb plantings remain productive for 8 to 15 years. As a bonus, rhubarb will tolerate a fair amount of neglect and still thrive as they are very tough plants.

Buying and Preparing Rhubarb

When buying Rhubarb choose fresh crisp stalks. Before using, peel off any stringy covering and discard any leaves and trim the ends. Completely peeling rhubarb is unnecessary. Stand the stalks



in cold water for an hour or so to refresh them before cooking. The stalks can be stored for 2-4 weeks in the refrigerator. A one-pound bunch of fresh rhubarb contains 3-5 stalks, and 1 lb. cooked yields 3/4 cup.

Always use a non-reactive pan for cooking this high acid plant such as anodized aluminum, stainless steel, Teflon coated aluminum or enamel-coated cast iron cookware. Rhubarb cooked in reactive

metal pots (aluminum, iron, and copper) will turn an unappetizing brown color as the metal interacts with acids in the fruit.

When freezing rhubarb, choose tender, well-coloured stalks with good flavor and few fibers. Wash, trim and cut into desired lengths. To help retain colour and flavour, blanch the rhubarb in boiling water for 1 minute and cool promptly in cold water. Lay rhubarb pieces on a flat tray and place in freezer until frozen. The pieces can then be packaged into freezer bags and they will not clump together.

Rhubarb adds a zippy signature to pies, tarts, ice cream toppings, and beverages. When combined with strawberries, raspberries, apples, and other fruits, the flavor only gets better. Rhubarb requires sweetening to minimize the extreme tartness, and has therefore been traditionally used in desserts. But don't discount rhubarb in cooking – it blends well with onions, ginger, coriander, raspberry vinegar, orange zest or cinnamon in sauces for meats and fish.

Nutritional Value


Nutritionally, rhubarb is low in calories but very acidic (pH 3.1).

Sugar can offset the acidity, however this ultimately increases the caloric count. Rhubarb is 95 percent water and has potassium and a modest amount of vitamin C. Although rhubarb can be tough and stringy, it does not contain a great deal of fiber, only 2 grams per cup. While rhubarb is high in calcium, it is bound by oxalic acid and therefore not easily absorbed by the body.

Nutrition Facts (1 cup diced, uncooked)

Calories: 26	Vitamin C: 10 mg
Dietary Fiber: 2 grams	Vitamin A: 122 IU
Protein: 1 gram	Folic Acid: 8.7 mcg
Carbohydrates: 6 grams	Calcium: 105 mg
	Potassium: 351 mg

Rhubarb Production in Ontario

While rhubarb can be found in the back corners of many home gardens, commercial production in Ontario (2003) yielded 22 hectares (166 tonnes) of rhubarb. At \$1781.8 per tonne, this amounted to a value of \$295,000 for Ontario farmers. 

Our Country Garden



1867 Shellard Rd., Cambridge
Tel. 740-8120

Easy Strawberry & Rhubarb Pie

Ingredients:

1 1/4 cups sugar	2 tbsp. Butter
1/3 cup all purpose flour (less 3 tbsp. flour)	3 tbsp. Quick-cooking tapioca
3 cups rhubarb	1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg
2 cups fresh sliced strawberries	Dash of salt

Preparation:

Preheat oven to 375. Cut rhubarb into 1/2 inch pieces. Mix nutmeg with tapioca. Mix all ingredients together except fruit then toss fruit with sugar mixture; let stand 15 minutes. Fill a pastry-lined 9-inch pie plate with fruit mixture. Dot with butter. Adjust top crust. Seal edges. Cover edge of pie with foil. Dot top with butter. Bake in a 375 oven for 25 minutes. Remove foil and bake for 25 minutes longer or until golden. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream. Yum!