

# TAMING THE TANG

*Rhubarb has a place in savory as well as sweet dishes*

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Rhubarb season is here, and with it comes a flood of childhood memories. A big patch in back of a neighbor's garage was a special treasure we kids looked forward to every year. We would each snap off a crisp red and green stalk before gathering in a circle to tell ghost stories in the dark. On balmy summer evenings we'd chomp on them, the intense sourness apparently not a problem for our young taste buds. The tang may even have enhanced the spooky atmosphere.

Perhaps due to these fond memories I still love rhubarb and, although I no longer eat it raw, I keep two different varieties of the vegetable growing in my garden. In fact, one of the plants came from my father's backyard. I recently gave a piece of that plant to my eldest son, Seth, in a sort of horticultural heritage move. Given my total lack of success with bonsai, I figured this would be my way of perpetuating the family love of gardening while providing a memento of his grandfather. Growing the family tree, as it were.

In addition to legacy building, I believe that rhubarb has the power to save a romance. The first time my then-boyfriend came to visit, my stepmother had cooked mackerel for dinner. The house reeked of the oily fish, so I rushed out to Dad's garden, picked some stalks, grabbed a pint of strawberries from the fridge, and baked a pie. By the time the boy arrived, flowers in hand, the house smelled divine. The boy is now my husband. Unfortunately, he still expects baked goods. Lots of baked goods.

Rhubarb had its roots in China, where its dried root was used for its laxative properties. In fact, it was so coveted for that purpose that at one point it cost more



Khoresht Rivas, a Persian rhubarb stew.

than cinnamon and saffron. Beginning in the 8th century, Islamic traders brought it west over the Silk Road, and in the late 13th century Venetian Marco Polo mentioned the vegetable in journals of his travels to China, but his fellow Italians didn't get around to planting it until much later.

Rhubarb finally arrived in Syria in the 14th century, and from there it traveled to Europe, where cooks began incorporating it as a fruit into pies and tarts (hence, its other name, "pie plant").

Back to the Chinese: They weren't averse to using rhubarb as a bargaining tool. After an 18th-century border conflict with the Russians, the Qianlong emperor forbade export of both tea and rhubarb to Russia. And, several decades later, the imperial commissioner Lin Zexu precipitated the Opium Wars when

he acted to ban the sale of those same two products to the British. In a letter to Queen Victoria, he wrote that China exported only health-giving products, while the British "barbarians" were bringing addiction to his country. He questioned whether the queen's subjects would be able to survive without tea and rhubarb.

Today, many American cookbooks and websites feature recipes for everything from strawberry-rhubarb pie to rhubarb jam. My personal favorite is blueberry-rhubarb crisp. But, unlike Europeans and Americans who favor desserts, Middle Easterners are known to use the sour rhubarb as a vegetable (it is actually classified as one botanically), adding it to fish and lamb dishes, such as in Khoresht Rivas, a Persian rhubarb stew.

There is some dispute over rhubarb's

arrival in America. Some records indicate that a Maine gardener obtained either seed or plant from Europe at the end of the 18th century, and introduced it to Massachusetts around 1820. Others claim that Philadelphia John Bartram cultivated it from a case of the root Benjamin Franklin had sent him while serving as the United States ambassador to France. At any rate, by the 1820s, rhubarb became available for purchase in American markets.

But, why buy rhubarb when it is so incredibly easy to grow? Because rhubarb likes the cold — and in fact can survive deep freezes — the northeastern United States is an ideal place to grow it. I'll bet that many of the readers of this column have a patch or two in their yards. Rhubarb can in fact grow in hot climates, but if so, it must be done as an annual and with lots of shade.

Wait until the second year after planting before picking the thickest stems through early to midsummer. After that, it loses flavor and can be woody. Harvest each stalk by pulling hard on it; the end will have a spoon-like shape to it. Make sure to leave at least half of the plant each year to encourage further growth.

Aside from its starring role in cobblers, jams and pies, rhubarb is reputed to have its household uses as well. Our friend Charlie recalls his mother polishing her cooking utensils by boiling chopped rhubarb in them. Just give them 10 to 12 minutes and rinse. Voila! Shiny pots and pans!

While you should never attempt to eat the leaves — they contain enough oxalic acid to kill you — their large size makes them perfect to lay in the garden as mulch.

And if your rhubarb should bolt, cut those gorgeous pink and green blossoms and stick them in a vase.

Rhubarb will live for decades, the only maintenance being a necessary splitting every five or six years. When you do split, you can start your own family legacy, or share a clump with your book club, your Mahjong group, fellow workers ...

## KHORESHT RIVAS (PERSIAN RHUBARB STEW)

Adapted from Nasreen Z. Zereshki's "My Persian Kitchen"

Serves 4

- 1 pound stew beef or lamb, cubed
- 2 medium yellow onions
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 3 cups parsley
- 1½ cups mint
- 2 pounds rhubarb, peeled and cut into ½-inch pieces
- Salt & pepper
- Oil

Sauté onion until just past translucent. Add turmeric, stir, and continue cooking for two more minutes. Add beef. Season with salt and

pepper. Brown meat on all sides.

Add 2 cups of water. Cook, covered, on medium low for one hour.

Separate herb leaves from stems, wash and chop. Add enough oil to thinly cover the bottom of a sauté pan. Add herbs and fry them for about 5 to 10 minutes, stirring frequently.

Add herbs to the stew. Continue to cook, covered, for a half hour longer until meat is tender.

Adjust seasoning if needed. Add rhubarb to the stew. Give one gentle stir and cook untouched for 10 to 15 minutes longer.

Rhubarb plants thrive in New England's cooler weather and can survive for decades.