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These Canadians Harvest Rhubarb In February

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

Thanks to Lennox Farm, folks around Toronto enjoy locally grown rhubarb as early as Valentine's Day.

"We grow 'forced rhubarb' that's grown in the dark," explains Bill French, a partner in the family business in Melancthon, Ont. "It's less tart and redder because there's no chlorophyll. It's very tender so we wear rubber gloves when we pick it."

The method dates back to the 1700's in France after an accidental discovery that rhubarb grew in the dark when the temperature warmed. When French's grandfather moved from England, he planted rhubarb in Canada. For extra income, he started growing forced rhubarb in the winter. The tradition carried on with French's father and at one time there were 43 growers in the area. High fuel prices in the 1970's forced most out of the business and Lennox Farm is currently the only forced rhubarb grower in the area.

The process starts by growing rhubarb outside for a couple of years. The varieties are Victoria and Sutton. In the fall, the roots are dug with an old potato digger. They are packed closely together on a little dirt with narrow walkways in sheds. Lennox Farms has 10,000 sq. ft. of space in three insulated sheds and is adding another shed.

After Christmas, the first shed is heated to 50 F, and the first stalks of rhubarb are ready to harvest by mid-February. Each root ball grows several stalks for about eight harvests, with no light, a weekly watering with a garden hose and nozzle, and a fan running to keep the small leaves dry to prevent mold. When the harvest is

over, the roots are hauled out of the shed, spread in the field and disced to break them up to return as compost to the soil.

Heat is turned on in the second and third sheds at two later times to lengthen the season until mid-May. After that, the field-grown rhubarb (Canada Red and German Wine varieties) are ready to harvest through early July.

"You need the right soil to start with," French says about the well-drained sandy loam soil they have for growing rhubarb. Lennox Farm grows 85 acres of rhubarb as well as peas, brussels sprouts and other vegetables for wholesale and direct markets.

"Growing forced rhubarb requires a strong back and weak mind," French says with a laugh. The plant roots (with clinging soil) average 50 lbs. each and there's a lot of bending, lifting and cutting involved. But it's a specialty crop that upscale markets in the region are willing to purchase for \$5/lb. and sell for \$8 to \$9/lb. Lennox Farm sells the seconds and cuts up rhubarb at their on-farm shop.

Because it's less tart, the winter rhubarb requires about half the sugar in recipes and it's very popular around Easter. It also cooks up more quickly because it's so tender.

The farm is experimenting with an Australian variety that could extend their season well into the fall.

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Seed Group Specializes In Open-Pollinated Vegetables

Zachary Paige started North Circle Seeds to promote open-pollinated vegetables and grains adapted to northern climates. Located in northern Minnesota, the fledgling seed company features beets, beans, and squash as well as a blue flour corn blend that includes genetics from Mexico. Eggplants and okra from the African Congo were all selected and adapted to the region by a Fargo, N. Dak. grower.

"I wanted to showcase farmers who were saving seed and adapting it to their region," says Paige. "Most of the organic and sustainable seed companies are on the East or West Coast."

Paige describes North Circle Seeds as a collaboration with seed saver growers in the region. Currently, he has nine contract growers on his website, all with their own videos about their farms. His own North Circle Farm is a combination market garden operation and seed production and research center.

North Circle started in 2020 with 24 varieties. This year he offered 72 and expects to add another 10 for the 2023 season. In addition, he has another 20 to 30 breeding projects. Some involve crossing select varieties; others involve dehybridizing a conventional hybrid.

Most of the seeds North Circle offers are older, open-pollinated seeds and all are non-GMO. However, Paige is open to hybrids if

superior to heirloom varieties.

"I have a commercial-grade hybrid popcorn that I'm excited about," he says. "It pops out in a ball shape like a puffball mushroom. Heirloom popcorns look pretty, but often don't pop that well. This variety is colorful and makes giant popcorn."

Paige continues to look for new growers, particularly if they represent diverse communities. "I want to fill out the catalog with more basics, but also seeds that are culturally important, but not currently available," he says. "We're working with a Latino farmers group in Long Prairie, Minn. They're trialing a lot of peppers."

In addition to seed, Paige also offers workshops on seed saving, plant breeding and selection, hand pollination, and seed storage and seed banking. He posts podcasts about unique garden seed varieties, complete with interviews, history and seed saving techniques. He also hosts seed processing and harvest parties on his farm, as well as an annual music festival that includes farm tours.

North Circle Seeds are available online, as well as at several co-ops and hardware stores in the region.

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Dahlia Business Is A Family Affair

Katie Byler likes to say her mom, Bonnie Ranck, is "the root" of Byler's business, Greystone Manor Gardens. About 7 years ago, Byler realized how much she loved growing dahlias, influenced by the beautiful flowers her mom always grew. Now, with the help of her family, parents, siblings and nephews and nieces, Byler supplies flowers to wedding and event planners, florists and individuals in the Philadelphia and Lancaster, Penn., region.

"Dahlias are a difficult flower to ship," Byler says. "We pride ourselves in picking and delivering fast and they are always in water. It's a great local market flower and they give roses a run for their money."

With about 200 varieties that range in size from 2 to 14-in. in dia., Byler says she's barely scratched the surface of the number of available varieties. Planting them is a family affair with her husband and four children, two of her sisters and their husbands and children and her

parents. Byler rents an acre from her parents' farm and has access to a well and stream for drip tape irrigation under landscape fabric, which reduces weed growth.

Her workforce has a system. Adults auger holes and lay out the tubers and children drop them in the hole and cover them up. To support the plants, stakes are installed every 12 to 15-ft. to support Hortonova plastic mesh. Later, there is weeding and harvesting to do. All are paid on a sliding scale according to age (5 to 18) and the work they do. Byler emphasizes making workdays fun with music, a meal and milkshakes, with cousins spending time together.

Greystone Manor Gardens also offers a subscription service with Byler's mother, making bouquets (once a week for five weeks) that customers pick up. Customers also like the Flower Bar, with a workbench, shears and flowers that can be delivered for baby or wedding showers, a girls' night out, etc.

The long season, including growing some early dahlias with cuttings under growing lights and ending with digging the tubers after a hard frost, is very busy, even with a family of helpers.

"I suggest starting small with dahlias because there's a learning curve," she advises, noting that tubers are a big investment, averaging \$7 to \$10/each. But they multiply, and at the end of the season, she stores her tubers in kiln-dried cedar chips (sold as livestock bedding) in slotted crates on shelves in an insulated room in a barn.

"This year we will have about 3,000 dahlia plants (plus other flowers and greens)," Byler says, noting she can rent more land from her parents as she expands.

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