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Rhubarb Applesauce

NATURALLY DELICIOUS RECIPES

Janice Feuer-Haugen

Crimson Stalks of Rhubarb

*Rhubarb when raw is so tough
And its leaves contain poisonous stuff.
But when cleaned and de-soiled
Tossed with honey and boiled
The crimson stalks are quite tasty enough.**

Rhubarb just seems an old-fashioned kind of fruit (though it is technically a vegetable related to sorrel and buckwheat). And like many of us, I was first introduced to rhubarb by my grandmother who would often have a covered glass dish of stewed rhubarb in her small refrigerator. It is no wonder though that rhubarb seems old, as its history can be traced back to ancient China. As early as 2700 BC there are records of rhubarb being cultivated for the medicinal, purgative qualities of its roots.

Rarely has there been a plant that so thoroughly frustrated the efforts of European botanists, gardeners, physicians and pharmacists, as rhubarb had many varying species with differing medicinal benefits and it did not breed true by seed. Beginning in 1778, however, rhubarb was recorded as a food plant in Europe, with its earliest known usage as a filling for pies and tarts—thus its alternative name “pie plant.” Early American records credit an unnamed Maine gardener during the latter years of the 18th century as responsible for the introduction of rhubarb to America where it soon gained great popularity. During the 19th and 20th centuries rhubarb was

the star of an “international culinary craze.”

While not a “superfood” based on its nutritional profile, rhubarb is a super food due to its beautiful color, and unique and tart flavor, as well as for the effective herbal remedies made from its roots and leaves. The crisp and sour crimson stalks of rhubarb are called “petioles,” and they are the only part of the plant that is safe to eat as the leaves contain toxic levels of oxalic acid. Rhubarb stalks are about 95% water and are considered a fair source of potassium and vitamin C and dietary fiber. And, although rhubarb is 8% calcium, this calcium is combined with a small amount of oxalic acid which interferes with the body's ability to absorb the calcium.

Many health-oriented cooks shy away from rhubarb as its tartness can require a large amount of sweetener. However, by pairing the rhubarb with naturally sweet apples and perhaps some strawberries, it is possible to use much, much less sweetener as with this issue's recipe for *Rhubarb Applesauce*,

which is delicious as it is, warm or cold. Rhubarb Applesauce is also a tasty topping for yogurt or pancakes, ice cream or even hot cereal. And, it also can be used as a fat-free and flavorful substitute for dairy products in baked goods such as muffins or cakes.

Now is the time to enjoy the crimson stalks of rhubarb that are just coming in to our local markets and soon to our local gardens as well. ■

Enjoy! Janice

*adapted from a limerick by PeterW@lms.demon.uk

Rhubarb Applesauce • Yield: 6 cups

2 pounds (6 1/2 cups) 1/2-inch diced rhubarb
1/2 cup light honey (such as clover honey)
3 medium apples, peeled, cored and 1/2-inch diced
1/4 cup water
1 1/4 teaspoons ground cinnamon

In a medium bowl, toss the rhubarb with the honey and let sit at room temperature while you prepare and cook the apples.

Place the diced apples into a large pot with the water and cinnamon. Cover the pot and cook over medium heat until the apples are softened though still chunky, about 10 minutes. Stir in the rhubarb and honey mixture along with all of the liquid and cook together with the pan covered for another 8–9 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the rhubarb is soft but most of it still holds its shape.

Note: Strawberries and rhubarb are a traditional favorite. Feel free to add 2 cups of hulled and halved strawberries at the same time that you add the rhubarb to the softened apples.

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