

## Garrison Keillor's 'Rhubarb Home Companion'

*Garrison Keillor, creator and host of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," is one of the many who are passionate about this extraordinarily tart and robust vegetable, especially in pies. We asked him about the cultural meaning of rhubarb, and this was his response:*

Our show is sponsored, in part, by Bepopareepop Rhubarb Pie and Rhubarb Pie filling (frozen), which are said to take away the taste of fear and bitterness. Anyway, rhubarb is a great institution in some parts of the country, a grass-roots vegetable – there is no Rhubarb Council promoting new uses of it, no Rhubarb Month (though of course the fresh stuff is only good in the spring and early summer, and after that it gets woody). It attracts little attention from the press, unlike oat bran and arugula. You seldom see rhubarb in a supermarket. You only get it for free. So you grow up thinking that your family are the only ones who know about it.

Rhubarb was discovered by Rudy and Barb Gustafson of Bemidji back in the '20s. It had been ignored by the Indians, the French, the Spanish and the Irish, because it is so bitterly sour, but sourness is no hindrance to Norwegians, nor is bitterness. Barb just poured sugar on it, as she tended to do with a lot of

things she didn't understand, and baked it in a pie and it tasted great, and they named it after themselves, with the 'h' added to give it style.

Rhubarb is a vegetable, no matter what the government says: a member of the buckwheat family of herbaceous plants including buckwheat, dock and smartweed, which are characterized by having swollen joints, simple leaves, small petalless flowers and small, dry, indehiscent fruit. Indehiscent means "not dehiscent," not opening at maturity to release the seed. So "indehiscent" means "hard, dry, holding onto the seed," which actually describes Norwegians quite well. Most Norwegians consider dehiscence to be indecent. They hold the seed in. But rhubarb pie comes along in the spring, when we're half crazed from five months of winter – it's the first fresh vegetable we get, and it makes us dehisce.

Apple pie is a synonym for mediocrity – the bad ones are about the same as the good – and pumpkin pie is just an excuse to eat nutmeg, but rhubarb pie is one of the basic components of the good life and will bring tears of pleasure to your eyes, especially if you cut back on the sugar called for in the recipe. Rhubarb pie is an artful balance of sour and sweet, and when it's good, there's nothing better.