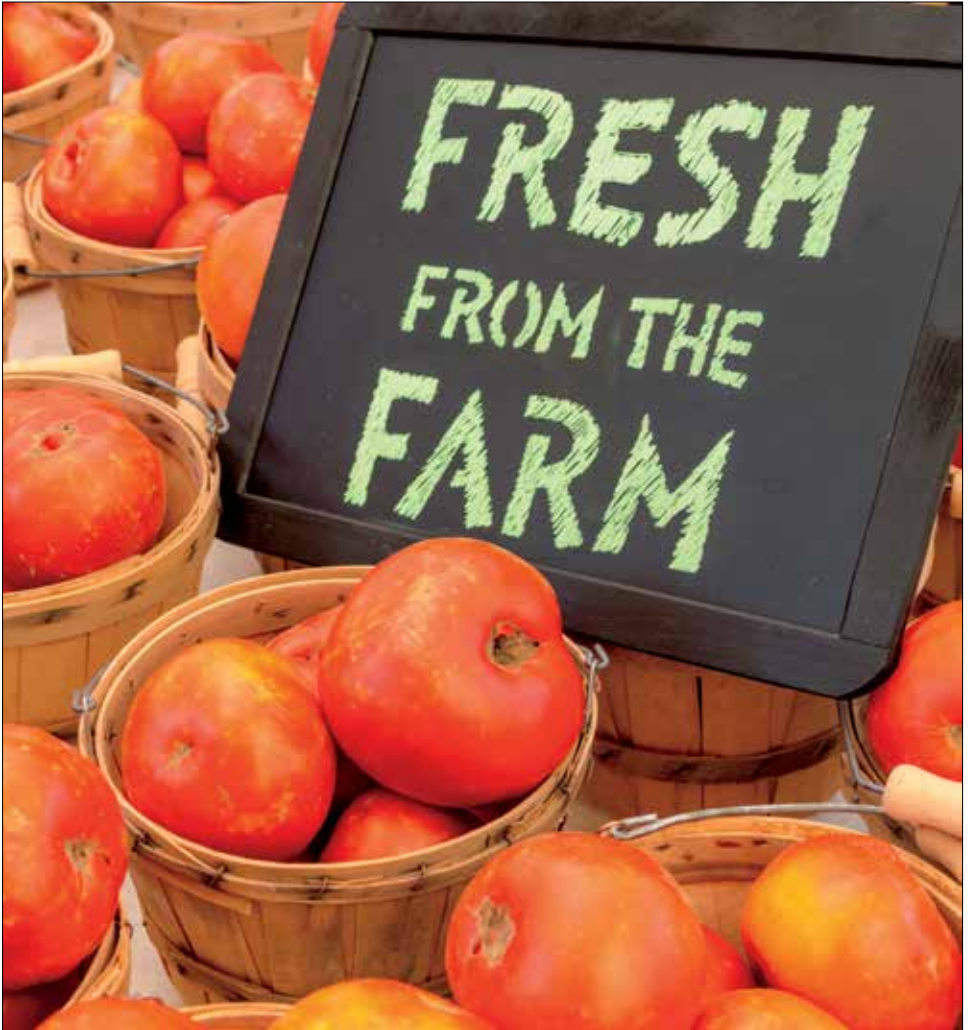


# FRESHLY PICKED

A Locavore's  
Love Affair with  
BC's Bounty

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When inspired by the extraordinary taste of locally grown harvests, you may find yourself falling in love all over again with fruits and vegetables you have known all your life. Photo: Terri Virbicki/Shutterstock.com

# INTRODUCTION

What is more agreeable than gathering to enjoy a tasty, satisfying meal with family and friends? I learned the answer to that question when I was young and lived in Quebec—la Belle Province *avec la différence*. It was there that I came to appreciate food well prepared and savoured with celebratory reverence. Eating can't always be an occasion, but I happily subscribe to the tenet that, whenever possible, we should live to eat, not eat to live.

The second part of my alimentary education came about when my family moved across the country to British Columbia. Lotus Land, we called it back then. Having lived only in wild places distant from any agriculture, it was soon apparent to me that BC was special. With one delightful, delicious encounter after another—such as grabbing for baby potatoes in a Ladner field—I made an acquaintance with the diverse and plentiful bounty that is grown in this province. It was a new and wonderful taste experience for me, and I relished the just picked, the newly dug and the recently reaped like a religious convert (or a Quebec chef).

The magic of the ever-changing offerings of the land became part of the charm and the challenge for me. “Get it before it's gone” turned into my mantra—as in, Is raspberry season finished already? The hunt was always on—not for a good deal at the mall but for the best and the freshest BC fruits and vegetables. The reward was flavour, one delectable mouthful after another as the growing season rolled by.

My enthusiasm for fresh local food remains undimmed. In this day of threatened agricultural land and climate change, my ardour has only increased. When produce sections remain almost unchanged twelve months of the year, it is easy to lose the connection to our

land, our farmers and the plants that feed us. Yet it is a connection that many of us crave. It's why we meander through farmers' markets, plant vegetable gardens, check out roadside stands and venture into the U-pick berry patch. Given the choice, I think we prefer to know where our food comes from, we like it to be fresh and local, and we believe in supporting our farmers and saving our farmland. Buying locally grown produce just seems like the right thing to do, even if it means digging a little deeper and learning a little more.

As with almost everything, a bit of knowledge goes a long way. Finding local bounty is easier when we know what grows when and where, and what can be stored. When will we see local peaches at the market? What local crops can we eat all winter? How do we tell a local from a tourist in the grocery store? How do we find the best and the freshest? The answers can be found inside these pages.



To make it easy, chapters are arranged by season, highlighting one fruit and vegetable after another from upstart spring radishes to autumn dawdlers like acorn squash. Selected chapters have already made an appearance in *Edible Vancouver & Wine Country* magazine. Availability charts sum up the timeline of BC's harvests, making it easy to know what to look for in June, or in October.

My love affair with BC's fruits and vegetables grew as I discovered they have quirky histories and peculiar growing habits all their own—like the fascinating sex life of corn or the checkered reputation of garlic. These stories, along with tales of my very personal relationships with BC's edible offerings—such as when I first met a green bean that wasn't out of a can—make their way into these pages as well.

And then there is the final and most important part—the eating! I share recipes and insights to bring out the best flavour at the dinner table, or to preserve the taste of summer sunshine for winter enjoyment: how to store a watermelon, whip up jewel-like cranberry sauce or freeze piquant roasted cherry tomatoes. When inspired by locally grown foods, you may find yourself falling in love all over again with the fruits and vegetables you have known all your life. Taste rules—and there is nothing better than sitting down at the table to relish and celebrate the marvellous diversity and flavour of BC's bounty.

Opposite: Blackberries grow with wild abandon in many parts of British Columbia, lining roadsides, fields and fences—offering a delicious, though prickly, harvest free for the picking every summer. Photo: [iStock.com/Hillview](http://iStock.com/Hillview)

## RELIABLE RHUBARB: MADE FOR CANADA

As a child, I came to know rhubarb early. My family lived on the shores of Lake Superior back then, a land of relentless wind and blowing snow in winter. My sister and I spent hours out in it. We pulled on sweaters, snow pants, boots and jackets with hoods trimmed in fur. Mom wrapped long woollen scarves around our foreheads, then down and over our chins and noses, ending with a lopsided knot tied at the back of our heads. You'd think we were heading out into the Arctic. We were as round as Russian nesting dolls but without the red cheeks—those came later.







We tramped all around the yard, leaving our footprints in the virgin white while searching for the highest drifts piled against the side of the house. Then we dug, flailing snow out behind us with frozen mittens, carving hideouts that were cozy and warm with our breath. And all the while we knew that below us, tucked into the ground next to the house, the rhubarb slept.

Rhubarb hibernates. It doesn't just rest, like other perennials; it sleeps like a bear in a den. It can withstand temperatures of minus thirty or worse, making it a valued friend of the North. In early spring, it pokes its green and red shoots out of the ground and grows like mad, shooting up sturdy stalks topped with giant leaves in even the shortest seasons. Each plant keeps this up for around fifteen years.

In places like Alaska, it was an early favourite of the first settlers. Russians brought rhubarb with them when they settled on Kodiak Island in 1784. Imagine eating something fresh in spring after a long hard winter of canned beans, shrivelled potatoes and goodness knows what else. During the 1920s, Henry Clark became known as the Rhubarb King for growing rhubarb that reached over 150 centimetres tall in the long daylight hours in Skagway, Alaska.

During our travels up in the Canadian North, my husband and I visited the astonishingly beautiful village of Atlin, tucked just inside BC close to the Yukon border. Once a popular tourist destination for ladies and gents in fancy dress who enjoyed paddlewheel boat rides on enormous Atlin Lake, it is a quiet place now but its beauty remains. We noticed that there were rhubarb plants everywhere: dotting yards, sprouting in gravel along the streets and pressing up against walls and in corners. Locals call it wild rhubarb because that's what it has become, and every spring they harvest the stalks to make chutneys, jams, cakes, muffins and pies. Visitors are welcome

Opposite: Hardy rhubarb is a friend of the North, stubbornly appearing year after year even in the harshest climates. It can be found growing all over BC. Photo: Sophie McAulay/Shutterstock.com



to take their pick but are warned to choose carefully and wash well, because the local dogs like it too.

Rhubarb was used as a medicine before it was a food. It likely showed up growing wild somewhere near the Bosphorus or Volga River to start, but around 2700 BC the Chinese dried and ground the roots for use as a stomach remedy and laxative. They attempted to monopolize the source and trade, using the Russians—who had a Department of Rhubarb in the 1600s—as brokers. Later on, during the Opium Wars in the 1800s, the Chinese attempted to halt British opium imports into China by threatening to cut all tea and rhubarb exports to Britain, leaving them constipated and missing tea time. At least, that was the idea. It didn't turn out well for the Chinese as the British responded with cannon fire, and the rest, as they say, is history.

It was the price of sugar that changed everything for rhubarb. When people could afford to sweeten bitter rhubarb stalks in the late 1700s, it became popular in desserts. British Victorians embraced growing and eating it with gusto. Settlers carried it to North America, where it appeared in farmers' markets in the early 1800s. In her book *The First Four Years*, Laura Ingalls Wilder describes gathering stalks of the pie plant, a.k.a. rhubarb, to make dessert, which to her embarrassment was not the success she'd hoped for. Sour faces all around the table told her she'd forgotten to add one vital ingredient—sugar.

Rhubarb is grown all over the province and can be found in farmers' markets and grocery stores starting in April in the southern parts of BC, and a bit later up north. The season extends up until July. Search for stalks that are firm and have cut ends that look fresh. Remove all vestiges of leaves (which are poisonous) and cut into small chunks. If the stalks are really thick, cut them down the middle first, as with celery. If you are lucky enough to have too much rhubarb on hand, it is easy to freeze: just lay out cut rhubarb on baking sheets, freeze and bag or put in containers. It will keep for a year, or right up until the new crop appears next year.

As with most people, my favourite recipes use this vegetable as a fruit in desserts. But there are ways to enjoy rhubarb in savoury dishes too. My ridiculously large selection of cookbooks varies from year to year, but tucked away in a corner is a small gem—a gift from a friend who travelled around the world in the 1970s, no small feat at the time. She bought it in Afghanistan when peace and modernization gained an all-too-brief foothold. Inside this little book, which I treasure, lies a recipe for rhubarb *koresh*, or stew. Savoury recipes for rhubarb now dot the internet.

But my favourite rhubarb recipe is for pie, and it couldn't be simpler. Featured in the cookbook *Fresh Tarts* by Susan Mendelson (of Lazy Gourmet fame) and Deborah Roitberg, it's called "Grandma's Get-Yourself-a-Husband Pie." Family lore says it worked not only for Deborah's grandmother, but for her mother as well.

To find your own sweetheart, start with an unbaked pie shell in a 23-centimetre (9-inch) pie pan. For the filling, combine 3 eggs, 3 tablespoons flour and  $\frac{7}{8}$  cup sugar, and whisk until blended. Add 4 cups diced rhubarb and pour into pie shell. (Mixture will be gooey.) Bake at 425 degrees Fahrenheit for 10 minutes, then reduce to 325 degrees and bake 30 minutes longer. Serve with love.

You can also serve up your very own rhubarb. Any BC resident who has a neglected corner in a yard somewhere can grow this hardy plant, and it takes just one plant to provide enough for a couple of months' worth of delicious desserts every year. Buy a potted rhubarb from the nursery in the spring and plant as directed. Give it a drink every once in a while and leave it alone the first year. The second spring, stalks can be twisted off sparingly as desired, leaving enough behind to let the plant recover and start to nod off by midsummer. The third year and every year after that will present a bonanza. You can be a rhubarb king or queen too.