

## Rhubarb History

Although many Sterling Heights residents are aware of the city's farmland past, few know that this area was once known as the "Rhubarb Capital of the United States." The soil and the climate were considered excellent for growing rhubarb. Around five million pounds of it were produced in the Sterling Heights and Utica area in 1961. This was sixty-five percent of the world's hot-house rhubarb.

Urban sprawl has replaced all of the hot-houses that were once prevalent in the Sterling Heights area. These hot-houses were heated by steam which was fired by coal. Rhubarb was a very profitable crop, but it required much time and extreme effort to get it to market.

Small nursery plants were grown for two years then transplanted to a larger space for two more years. In the fall after the first frost, the rows of rhubarb plants were plowed out and laid out on top of the furrows until they froze into hard clumps of dirt-covered rhubarb weighing fifty to sixty-five pounds each. These clumps were loaded onto wagons and taken to the hot-houses. After six weeks in the houses which were heated to sixty-three degrees, the "forced" rhubarb was ready to pick. The rhubarb was picked all at once so farm families often worked around the clock to get the job done.

Is rhubarb a fruit or a vegetable? It is a vegetable. The stalk or stem is the only edible part (the leaves contain poisonous levels of oxalic acid). Because the flavor is very strong, it is usually cooked with sugar or other types of sweetener. It can be made into pies, jam, or compote. If you have never eaten rhubarb, give it a try! Try the recipe below.



## Rhubarb Kuchen

1 cup flour 1 tsp. baking powder  
¼ tsp. salt 2 Tbsp. sugar  
1/3 cup margarine 1 Tbsp. milk  
1 egg 3 cups cut rhubarb  
1-3 oz. package strawberry jello

Sift dry ingredients. Cut in margarine, combine egg and milk. Add to flour mixture and press into greased 9" square pan. Cover dough with rhubarb. Sprinkle jello evenly over rhubarb and sprinkle the following topping over jello.

Topping:  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup flour, 1 cup sugar,  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. cinnamon,  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup margarine. Combine dry ingredients. Cut in margarine to form crumbs and sprinkle over top of jello. Bake at 375 for 45 minutes.