

Horseradish

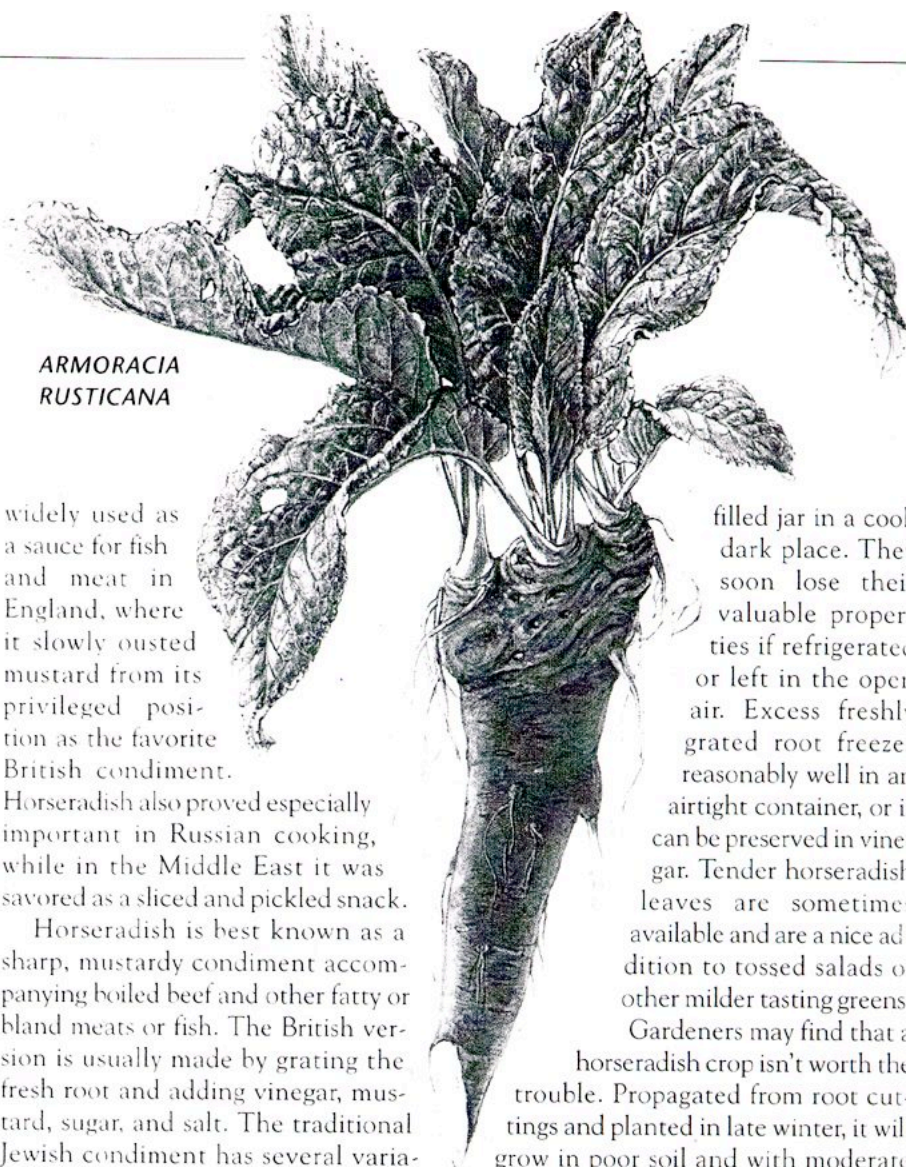
The root of the horseradish plant, *Armoracia rusticana*, packs the biggest wallop of any cultivated vegetable. Hot and pungent, it is a member of the mustard family, and like all other cruciferous vegetables (such as cabbage and broccoli), it gets its flavor from sulfur compounds. Its sharp, acrid odor is released only when the root is scraped or sliced, and is similar to that of the volatile compound found in mustard oil.

The horseradish plant is a coarse, vigorous, and hardy perennial, with large, dark, glossy leaves and tiny white flowers on stems that stand as tall as four feet. The root is cylindrical, with a rough brown exterior and a fibrous white interior.

According to Wendell Schey of the Tulelake Horseradish Company, there are approximately 3,000 acres of horseradish cultivated annually in the United States. Most is grown in Illinois, Wisconsin, and California, and is either of the "common" type, with broad, wrinkled leaves and high-quality roots, or the "Bohemian" type, with narrow, smooth leaves and somewhat inferior roots. Japanese horseradish, or *wasabi*, is an entirely different species though it's similar to horseradish in its sinus-clearing piquancy. It's made from the "horseradish tree," or *Moringa oleifera*, which is native to India and the Mediterranean. The pungent pale green *wasabi* is best known as a condiment paste that's served with sashimi and sushi.

There is some debate as to when horseradish root was deemed a culinary herb. Since antiquity, the root has been purported to have medicinal properties—it variously improved eyesight, dissolved gallstones, treated gout, and relieved stiffness. When mixed with honey and water, horseradish has been a standard remedy for hoarseness. We can be certain that horseradish leaves were eaten as early as 1250 BC, at the time of the Exodus, because it was listed as one of the five bitter herbs of the Passover seder.

A native of temperate eastern Europe, by the late Middle Ages horseradish was growing wild in northern Europe and Britain. By the 16th century, it had become a popular flavoring in Scandinavia and Germany, and was



**ARMORACIA
RUSTICANA**

widely used as a sauce for fish and meat in England, where it slowly ousted mustard from its privileged position as the favorite British condiment.

Horseradish also proved especially important in Russian cooking, while in the Middle East it was savored as a sliced and pickled snack.

Horseradish is best known as a sharp, mustardy condiment accompanying boiled beef and other fatty or bland meats or fish. The British version is usually made by grating the fresh root and adding vinegar, mustard, sugar, and salt. The traditional Jewish condiment has several variations—the simple horseradish, vinegar, and sugar version is often augmented by tart cooking apples or grated beet. In Denmark, a common dish pairs poached turbot with melted butter and horseradish, and in Germany, carp is given a sauce of horseradish, cream, ground almonds, and sugar. The French gastronome Escoffier suggested a sauce of grated horseradish mixed with bread crumbs and thick cream.

Horseradish root is available fresh, whole or grated; in dried, flaked, or powdered forms; and in commercially produced sauces and creams. Since the volatile oils dissipate rapidly after cutting or grating, or when subjected to heat, use whole, fresh roots whenever possible. Look for plump, firm, crisp roots, usually available fall through spring. Thoroughly scrub fresh roots or carefully peel away the brown skin before finely grating or food processing; discard the tough inner core. Store unused roots in a sand- or dirt-

filled jar in a cool, dark place. They soon lose their valuable properties if refrigerated or left in the open air. Excess freshly grated root freezes reasonably well in an airtight container, or it can be preserved in vinegar. Tender horseradish leaves are sometimes available and are a nice addition to tossed salads of other milder tasting greens.

Gardeners may find that a horseradish crop isn't worth the trouble. Propagated from root cuttings and planted in late winter, it will grow in poor soil and with moderate sunshine, but needs moist soil and sun to flourish. If you do try your hand, keep the plant isolated, and when digging it up, remove all traces of root; otherwise it will take over your garden. Like a number of weeds, it can propagate itself from small bits of root left in the ground.

HORSERADISH MIGNONETTE

Horseradish makes a bracing and delicious accompaniment to briny oysters. Makes 1¼ cup.

- ½ cup peeled and sliced horseradish
- ¼ cup rice vinegar or other mild vinegar
- ½ tsp. grated lemon zest
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 Tbs. sugar
- ½ tsp. freshly cracked black pepper
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

Blend the ingredients in a food processor. Allow the flavors to meld for 20 min. before spooning over oysters on the half shell.

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