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It's been a funny spring, a meteorological adventure. We wore sundresses on Easter Sunday but within a day or two were assailed by rain and snow. And then more heat, more snow, more rain and on and on it goes. Proving once again, if you don't like the weather in New England, just wait a few minutes or at the most a few days.

At least for today there is no snow in the forecast and the sun is shining. When I look over my shoulder and out my office window I am rewarded with a forest of dazzling color. The maple and beech trees are in full leaf. Far from pale and demure, the bright and brilliant spring green leaves are practically florescent.

My brave daffodils are fading fast but the lilacs are in bloom, the lupines are beginning to bud and the rhubarb is at least two feet high. The rhubarb is a gift from my sister. When I moved into my house near Pleasant Lake there were no gardens just a lot of grass and a few bushes. Brenda came over with boxes and buckets filled with day lilies, Siberian iris, lilac, rhubarb and advice.

After I got it planted, I began to wonder what to do with the rhubarb. I asked Brenda if she had any great ideas. If I remember correctly, she told me that she grew rhubarb more for its good looks than for eating. With its big dark green leaves and red stalks it is indeed beautiful. My Pop Nye grew rhubarb when I was a kid. I remember his rhubarb plants were huge, at least as big as a five year old me. However, I don't remember eating his rhubarb. Thinking back it is doubly strange because my grandmother did a lot of baking, even during the summer. She made lots of pies, cakes and crisps with blueberries, blackberries and raspberries, maybe even cherries, but not a one with rhubarb.

The first year, the plant was small so I followed Brenda's advice and simply admired it. I think I did the same in year two. Eventually, I decided that I needed to make something out of it. I thought of pie. My friend Julie bakes rhubarb pies. She bakes them often enough that rhubarb pie might qualify as one of her specialties. She tops them with a fancy lattice crust which makes them all the more special. I decided to keep it simple and settled on rhubarb crisp; some call it a crumble.

I like the flexibility of a fruit crisp. You can use lots of different fruits. In the fall and winter my favorite is apple, with and without cranberries. In the summer, I make it with blueberries, peaches and plums. While I usually use fresh fruit, I have used frozen. They are homey and friendly, perfect for a casual get-together or a simple celebration. I've baked crisps and crumbles for cozy dinners for three or four as well as for parties of 100 or more.

Crisp seemed like a good starting point for my culinary experiments with rhubarb. My parents had nothing better to do so I invited them to take part in the research. I made it worth their while by throwing in dinner. We all agreed that it was delicious, a little tart and a little sweet. Now it is one of my go-to spring desserts; year round actually since rhubarb freezes beautifully.

Since that first rhubarb crisp, I have made rustic rhubarb crostatas and flan, rhubarb muffins and cakes as well as strawberry-rhubarb soup*. Rhubarb and yummy rhubarb desserts are now among my favorite signs of spring. Enjoy and bon appétit!

Bon appétit and enjoy!

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Old-Fashioned Rhubarb Crisp or Crumble

Who doesn't love a good crisp or crumble? If you have never made one with rhubarb, give it a try! Enjoy!

Serves 6-8

1 tablespoon butter
2 pounds rhubarb, washed trimmed and cut into bite-sized pieces
Grated zest 1 orange
1 tablespoon Grand Marnier
2/3 cup light brown sugar, packed
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
Pinch salt



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Generously butter a 2 quart baking dish.

Combine the rhubarb with the orange zest, Grand Marnier, brown sugar and spices. Pour into the baking dish. Sprinkle with the crumble topping.

Put the crisp on a baking sheet to catch any drips and bake until the top is brown and the fruit is bubbly, 45 minutes to 1 hour. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream.

Crispy-Crumbly Topping

3/4 cup flour
1 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ginger
1 pinch nutmeg
4 ounces cold, unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
3/4 cup quick-cooking oatmeal



Combine the flour, sugar, salt and spices in a food processor; pulse to combine. Add the butter, pulse until the mixture resembles coarse corn meal. Add the oatmeal; pulse until the topping comes together in small lumps.

**To freeze rhubarb, wash, dry, trim and chop the stalks into bite size pieces. Then, store in plastic re-sealable bags. Do not thaw before using.*

**You can find my recipes for strawberry-rhubarb soup and rhubarb muffins on website at www.susannye.com.*