

## THE RADICAL ROOT HORSERADISH – FLOWERS AND PITRE PARK

What 3,000-year-old plant has been used as an aphrodisiac, a treatment for rheumatism, a bitter herb for Passover Seders, and a flavourful accompaniment for beef, chicken, and seafood? If you guessed - horseradish! You are right! *An Internet statement*

It is written that the history of horseradish is intricate and mysterious! It is not a wonder then that I wished to have this impressive plant in my garden when Marg and I were in the process of finalizing the shape, width, and depth of the yard surrounding our new home on 36 Elm Street, in Pine Falls.

Of the many effective benefits mentioned above about this magic fruit of the earth, the first three were not in the realm of desirables at my age or station in life. Nor was it needed. But the last one, the “flavourful accompaniment” for three fine foods that could be improved by this surprising root, was right up there. Food, in the way it could be prepared and improved, became one of the central pursuits among many that consumed me at the time. And I decided to cultivate and mature nature’s enhancement right there in the middle of that huge garden occupying the greater part of our backyard. How things have changed. I still have a miniature garden, and it is the lawn and shrubbery that have grown to take over the massive domain the garden once demanded and possessed.



To my consternation I found out that aside from the benefits of this proliferating root, there is much to fear. Horseradish, once established in a plot, is very hard to be rid of should you ever want to. There are many ways of confinement and a person must be aware of all of them, lest they fail to stop the spread. Some said that you should only lodge its beginning within the circumference of a concrete or metal wall deeper than its ability to spread in order to contain it. When digging it up for dispersal, even the teeniest bit of root will start a new colony. The alarming warnings of Margaret and friends, and the uneasiness I felt which I would never admit to, convinced me to establish my horseradish intrigue across the street, leaving our pristine yard intact, root free.

When building new houses on Elm Street, the contractor decided to move all topsoil to the far edge of the street adjacent to the woods in order to keep it there for further use. That low ridge of good prime leaf mould would be ideal and just the place to establish my new venture. Horseradish heaven! Both endeavours would be satisfied, the saviour of our yard and a potent root to enjoy with beef, chicken, and seafood.

I obtained the necessary starter tubers and furtively planted them in the most obscure place yet within eyesight of our living room window. The impressive horseradish flourished. Their long leaves swayed in the breeze as they shouted, “Look at me, I am here in front of 36 Elm Street. I will make your beef, chicken, and seafood taste just fantastic.” I wished that my efforts would not be advertised so vigorously. But then the

mind of man reacts. There must be a solution and there was! Plant flowers around its periphery and all would be fine. There would be no objection to brightening the area with the blooms of spring, the very thing that most people look forward to and implement when drabness must be alleviated.

The process started. New ground was retrieved from the fresh, wild growth which was determined to take over, a plan for a modest flower garden was soon in place, and the protection and disguise of horseradish heaven was complete. Marg and I, along with our little girls, took full advantage of flowers to nourish the gift of sight as well as the mysterious root for a taste delight.

Ironically, we did not dream or envision that the end results of our modest beginning would eventually “blossom” into an extended area demanding considerable time and effort to maintain. It did turn into a labour of love though. There were years of tweaking and as we tweaked along, our sometime unpretentious ambitions grew out of proportion. I found myself clearing land as our parents did after the turn of the century, the difference being they for sustenance, and myself to hide that mystical, radical root firstly and then to continue a task that I grew fond of. Though horseradish was dispensed years earlier (at a high cost in labour I recall), it remains the original reason why



flowers grace the wood's edge across the street. The end result was the evolution of an area into what is now called Pitre Park. Annuals, perennials of many kinds, flat stones, trees and shrubbery, all in the end outlasted that radically mystical, intricate, and mysterious root, which I now have to unceremoniously purchase at the store.

The park grew. I needed a place for my boat, which required another extension. There was need for an area to contain waste to compost, and to harvest that waste material into the flowerbeds, as well as the garden in the backyard. It occurred to me that I was trespassing, as it were. This was Company land and there should be some agreement to be able to continue. To this end I asked for and received an audience with Don Munroe, the mill manager. He was delighted that someone would do something to enhance the town and gave me blanket permission. There were no legal papers but the verbal accord has stood the test of time.

A person who is well known in Pine Falls was, without doubt, very instrumental in the different aspects of development of this little area of aesthetic importance. This would be Babe Dawson, everybody's Grandma! But especially she was my family's Grandma and the only one I had ever known. This small park on Elm Street, these little flowerbeds, provided a place for her to extend her knowledge and her willingness to help, and to find a home for the many extra perennials that she had in her yard on the Rock Area and later at the Pineview



Lodge. And you have to know that all perennials in her garden were extras. Grandma, above all, was generous in all things. Most varieties that bloom across the street can be traced right back to Grandma's hand. What a legacy. What better way is there to leave her mark than to leave something that is living? And as Babe always exclaimed, "Boys, oh boys, oh boys!" These were her words for excitement, of satisfaction, for frustration or contentment, or any other feeling. Grandma "D" lives on...in the life of her flowers.

In order to have the more aesthetically appearing needle trees of spruce and balsam display their elegance, it was necessary to eliminate the poplar. These fronting large trees



were removed as well as the smaller editions and the saplings, away back into the balsam stand. In nature's own way when the needle trees are free of competition, they flourish. It gave a polished look to the whole area. The growth of fir trees, when the park was started, was about six to ten feet high, standing amongst the poplars. They are now surpassing the fifty-foot mark. This forest in dark green ceremonial dress provides a natural backdrop, along with a single

multiple trunk birch, to the variety of flowers that enhance pictures of the many weddings whose memories were recorded there.

In these early years the entire area seemed to need a direction. The flowerbeds sloped up to the trees and the plots demanded structure to bring out their natural attractiveness. At work one day my superior ordered me to take a truck, go to a home that the Company had just purchased, and remove a pile of stones and debris to the nuisance grounds. He advised me that they were of no value to the new owner. I proceeded to carry out his orders. After viewing what was termed unwanted I realized where these flat stones could be utilized. My garden across the street suddenly became the nuisance grounds and resting place for the unwanted debris. It should be noted here that the stone structure you see bolstering the earth in the park was originally retrieved and carted by boat and vehicle from the shores of some obscure islands in Lake of the Woods in Ontario. Con Howe, the previous owner of the home, owned a cottage in the lake area and had aspirations and plans for that "debris". I'm happy his efforts were not in vain.

The park continued to grow through the years both in size and in importance. It seemed to take on a life of its own, demanding width and depth. To provide for an area of boat storage that would in turn camouflage the boat's



existence, it became necessary to add a second outlet or passage in. Hence the planting of more trees and shrubs of a nature that enhances as well as obscures. The growing evolution was unstoppable.

The nature and availability of this little park became known quite widely and as a consequence newly married couples phoned regularly to take pictures. The school descended on the area yearly for graduation pictures. Anniversaries and birthdays were also counted in. But something was missing. There should be props that would add to the picture-taking experience for those who wished. The idea of a bridge was born. A birdbath and a Canadian flag were also considered to decorate the area. In due time all were included and the yearly parade continued. A photographer from Whitemouth, a town forty miles south, was hired by the school and for weddings. He made yearly forays from that distance quite often. He



enlightened me at one time that his studio displayed pictures as advertisement. A young couple viewed a picture taken on our little bridge and asked to have the same thing done for them. He explained, saying, “Well, you know that bridge is in Pine Falls.” The couple made a special trip, along with the photographer. It could be noted here that, to my knowledge, the first wedding pictures ever taken in the park happened in 1985. It was for Jeffrey, son of Mr. and Mrs. John Bulmer.

Not too many years after this first park wedding, another first happened to nature's flowerbeds. It took the form of a nasty, somewhat aggressive storm. In 1988 a terrible wind crossed Lake Winnipeg from the Gimli area, descending upon the cottagers at Lester Beach. After devastating as much as was necessary, it found its way to Pine Falls via the Belair Reserve. The storm unleashed its fury upon the tall spruce at the rear of Pitre Park (although it did not hold that moniker at the time). This storm continued on its destructive pattern to the Great Falls region to dissipate far beyond the Bird River district. Two of the taller trees, of the one hundred-year plus variety, crashed down upon the blooms and shrubs. I'm sure its intention was to reach my boat to inflict as much damage as it could but fortunately Mr. Storm was frustrated. We merely had to clear branches away. The garden was not so lucky. However, time heals many things, and our little park was one of them.



Out in front of the flower area, where the row of flat stones sleep, lived a single willow. The variety escapes me though it may have been a diamond willow. In any case it grew to a point where time ravaged its appearance. I found it willing to submit to surgery so I cut off the top! To

spite me, I suppose, it branched out into a maze of long limbs not unlike you would see on a palm tree. A curious visitor asked of me did I know the type of tree it was? I answered yes, "It's a palm tree." The visitor countered with the fact that palm trees only grow in the south. "Well, this is a northern palm," I explained. "I picked it up while on a trip through Northern California. As you see they grow very well out here." The now *well-informed* visitor retired to the street to continue a planned walk.

Time passes, and as it does the inevitable happens. We grow older, and sometimes



sickness intervenes. And so it was that Margaret was struck with an aneurysm that held her confined to hospitals and a personal care home for two years. During these hard times our little park fell into disrepair for a short while until the town people, in their generosity, turned out to help. This was, in the town's history, a time when many efforts were organized to beautify our village. I was conducting my usual chores in the house when the trail of endeavour took me past our front window. To my astonishment I saw three people with shovels digging in the park. Infuriated I descended upon them with nothing less than absolute anger to demand why they were digging up my flowers. I was completely taken aback when they displayed a beautiful sign, which read "Pitre Park". This work of art, constructed from a large tree trunk

cut on the bias by local Butch Boisvert, had been lying flat on the ground not visible from our front window. And now you know that vanity on my part had nothing to do with the fabrication of that sign, a symbol and recognition that I appreciate so much.

It was during these times, very early in the 2000's, that the town council decided, because of the underlying granite that at times protruded from the soil, no houses could or would be able to be constructed on two lots fronting my property. I was informed that this small area was decreed as park property and the life of Pitre Park was secured.

As the wheel of life continues on, people and customs change. From an influx of requests for wedding pictures in times past, it has reduced to a single blessed occasion in 2009. Yet the park remains at the pleasure of the people who wish to take advantage of nature's display. I humbly thank those who allowed me to be part of their memories in the images that they hold and cherish. *Marcel R. Pitre*

