

# Strawberries and asparagus: A Memorial Day farm tradition

by Lisa Schauer

Strawberries and Memorial Day go together like watermelons and the Fourth of July, or pumpkins and Halloween. Somehow, the holiday just doesn't seem complete without them.

Forever linked in nature to their harvest season, these produce represent all-American celebrations and farm traditions.

Strawberry plants are perennial, although their yield goes down each year. They miraculously wake up every spring, and on or about Memorial Day weekend, they start to produce their harbinger fruit.

Unlike ever-bearing varieties found in supermarkets, locally grown June-bearing strawberries fruit only from late May through June. Strawberries are rich in antioxidants, vitamin C, potassium and other nutrients.

Growing up on the old Sleepy Creek farm, there was a certain cadence to strawberry season. The first tiny berries formed in early May, and were closely watched as they slowly turned from white to pale pink and finally, a deep crimson red, yielding the season's first strawberry.

This highly anticipated event happily coincides with Memorial Day weekend and all its glory, paying tribute to America's fallen heroes, cookouts, and the official kickoff of summer.

The first berry of the season would be picked and eaten warm, right out of the bucket. Strawberry shortcakes were up next, sliced and sprinkled with sugar, spooned over a sweet, savory biscuit and topped with freshly made whipped cream from our Jersey cow, Bossy.

Then came strawberry ice cream, churned by hand. Family members and friends took turns cranking the handle on top of a steel canister filled with berries, cream and sugar, sealed and churning inside a wooden bucket filled with salted ice.

The seasonal fruit matured quickly, with an abundance of berries creating a flurry of baking, canning and freezing on the farm.

Rhubarb comes in at the same time, so strawberry rhubarb jams and pies were very popular. I learned later in life that strawberries can be hulled and frozen whole, but I expect we rarely froze fruit on the farm because freezer space was a premium saved for meats and favored vegetables like beans, corn and peas.

As Memorial Day weekend happens

to fall on this writer's birthday each year, it was my turn to pick a birthday dinner. Like a death row inmate's last meal, the birthday meal was what seemed a once-in-lifetime chance to fulfill your wildest food fantasy.

Each year, my birthday dinner request was always the same. Rack of lamb was served with mint jelly, roasted baby potatoes and steamed asparagus with hollandaise sauce, followed by strawberry shortcake for dessert.

Your choice of beverage was milk or water as a kid on an organic farm. A ceramic jug filled with creamy cow's milk sat on the dinner table each night, along with churned butter, clover honey, homemade bread and rolls.

Strawberry plants live about six years, and they produce fewer berries each year. So to keep the crop going, each plant must be dug up every few years with its runners and soil in order to be replaced by a younger plant. This was a thankless summer task without the reward of a sweet berry to munch on as you made your way through the overgrown field.

Beware of snakes at this time of year. It was here in the strawberry patch that a copperhead snake sent a young girl to intensive care from a snake's bite. If you suddenly smell cucumbers, you have already disturbed a copperhead and they will strike if they feel threatened.

## Asparagus

Another edible perennial that pops up around Memorial Day is asparagus. Best left un-harvested for the first few years, asparagus plants can be productive for up to 20 years.

Elegant and refined, asparagus is a powerhouse vegetable with detoxifying compounds called glutathione that help break down carcinogens and other free radicals. These luscious stems are rich in vitamins A, C, E and K. They're also full of chromium, a trace mineral that enhances the ability of insulin to transport glucose from the bloodstream into cells.

Asparagus can be gently steamed, grilled, roasted with a little olive oil, or pureed into soup. Be careful not to overcook this delicate vegetable, as it should be served while still bright green.

Like strawberry season, asparagus season only runs from late May through June. Once the stalks turn thick and woody, they're left to fern and go to seed.



Asparagus shoots from the earth overnight like miniature spears. On the farm, asparagus season came in like a rush and was gone too soon. Nothing was more sublime and sophisticated than fresh asparagus.

Each morning, I would grab a whicker basket and a steak knife, and head back down to the asparagus

patch for the day's harvest. I would imagine how lovely the stalks would taste when covered in a velvety hollandaise sauce, or folded into a cream of asparagus soup, and served with a crusty loaf of bread.

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