



**AFTER DIGGING HORSE RADISH ROOTS,** Connie Simonsson, (above) washed them down in her kitchen, then pared the outer layer away and cut them into chunks that will go into her old food processor. The roots (below) start out brown and knobby, looking a little like iris tubers.

# Horseradish!

## Preparing pungent plant brings tears to eye

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Connie Simonsson is at the kitchen sink, peeling roots. Her nose has crinkled already, her eyes look a little watery, but she keeps peeling the brown outer layer from the lumpy brown tubers.

"Now the first thing is, this is a long process," she says. "It's going to take all day."

"To start a new batch, all you have to do is cut off some of these roots," she adds, waving her hand at a pile of brown, lumpy things that look a little like iris roots.

Putting up horseradish is a family tradition, she says, but she's the only one who carries it on.

"My mother, Amy Rehm, used to do it," she recalled. "My father, Harold Rehm, when he retired, he took over. He'd do it in the garage."

"When my sister came home, they used to take a few roots. Now they just pick up a jar. I usually do about 50 jars a year."

She and her husband John give those away to friends, relatives and to customers of John, who's a cattle buyer.

"We took some to North Dakota," Connie said. "I mailed some to New Jersey. I mailed some to Canada. We'll be taking some to Colorado next week."

The processing starts with digging, of course. The horseradish patch is out back, in the couple's huge garden, where it's slowly taking over the asparagus patch. The plant, a relative of mustard, has been used for centuries both as a flavoring and as a medicine, said to cure headaches and relieve back pain, among other things. It's not a radish, though it is a root plant. The leaves even look a little like mustard greens.

"To start a new patch," she says, "all you have to do is cut off some of these roots (and plant them). It's pretty much on its own out here. I think I watered it once, but other than that . . ."

"It spreads," she adds with a grin. "Whoever comes after us will have to use a lot of Roundup."

Like asparagus, Connie adds, you don't pick the horseradish for the first two or three years. This year, she said, she had to water the patch before she could dig any. The ground was just too hard. Even so, she's never sure she gets most of a root.

"It just breaks off," Connie said. "Who knows how deep those roots go."

Then to the sink to wash and peel the crop.

"You don't put the water on warm," she said. "The peels, not even the goats will eat them."

Once cleaned and peeled, she added, the roots are ready to be shredded. She takes them outside, where her old food processor sits on a table under a crisp fall sky. It's cool, she agreed, but the house would stink for a month if she did this inside.

Besides, out here, she's got a view of the small ranch northeast of Oberlin where she and John raise Spotted Draft horses, all the way down to Sappa Creek.

"I have taken it to the sunroom downstairs when the weather was bad," she said with a look of disdain. "I wish I could use my new food processor, but once you use it for horseradish, . . ."

She grinds a jar's worth, then starts scooping it into a jelly jar. She said she uses clean jars, but doesn't worry about sterilizing the output. As far as she can tell, nothing bad can grow in horseradish and anyway, heat would destroy the hot mustard oil that gives the mixture flavor.

She adds vinegar until the mash looks right. There's no recipe, just years of experience. Then, "my secret ingredient."

A spoonful of sugar to soften the taste. And the horseradish is ready to scoop into a jar.

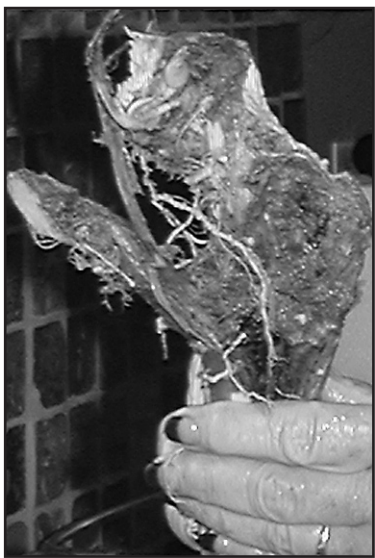
Try a taste? It's pungent all right.

"It gets stronger in dry years," she says with a grin.

Putting up horseradish takes commitment. It's not for the faint of heart, or the untrained nose. But Mrs. Simonsson says her favorite recipe is one anyone can make at home, whether you have some of her horseradish or just a bottle from the store.

She calls it Jezebel Sauce, and it lives up to the spicy name:

- 1 small jar horseradish
  - 1 small jar apple jelly or orange marmalade
  - 1 small jar apricot preserves
  - 1 small jar peach preserves
  - 1 small jar or can dry mustard (may substitute 1 small jar pineapple jam)
- Mix together in blender or food processor, return to jars and refrigerate. Connie says this is great on ham or pork chops.



Story and photos by Steve Haynes



**MRS. SIMONSSON** (above) showed off her "secret ingredient," a little sugar to soften the taste of her horseradish. Washed, peeled and chipped (far left), the root was ready to be ground. The plants (left), a relative of mustard, sprout leafy greens each year – and spread to take over a garden.