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7-6-1953

### Dieffenbach On Lettuce, July 6, 1953

Victor C. Dieffenbach

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1. 577-214-20  
Lettuce! — “Aler Tse-lawt!”

Lettuce is the housewife's stand-by in the Spring. It can be grown so easily and with so little work, since it is one crop that requires no spraying, and very little hand-weeding. While it should be sowed very early, yet it can, by repeated sowing, be had on the table almost all summer. Any good soil will grow lettuce. The tiny seeds should be sown in shallow drills, and very thinly covered by soil.

Granny would sow her lettuce in rows, so far apart that a narrow-bladed hoe could be drawn between them. She would pull that hoe along the side of one row, just missing the tiny seedlings, and hardly missing a weed; and back of her would come the writer, an archer of eight happy years, crawling along crab-like, in reverse, and pulling out the weeds that were so close to the row that she could not uproot them. I would put them in an old bucket, and then dump them in the pig-pen. She would say: “Aler sei, glielha see, nu no doona see nimmy wola!” (The hogs like them; and then they won't grow any more!) She never spent more than a half of the time in her  
July 6th. 1953 Aler Alet Bauer.



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Garden, than what her neighbors did; and yet there were never any weeds to be seen.

When we were finished for the day - she with her trusty hoe, and I with my nimble fingers and my ever-present kettle, it took a sharp eye that could find a weed in that garden. Even the tiny ones in the row I would pull out; and if the first and second weedings were well done, there were few that survived.

When it looked as if it might give rain, then we took an old bucket, a sieve, and an old coal-shovel, and we went out to the wood-pile; she would put the sieve on top of the bucket and put a few shovel-fuls of the dark moist saw-dust and soil - "schpay-grundt" she called it; it was partly de-composed saw-dust, fine chips, and particles of bark and soil, all mixed by the busy hens scratching for worms. (Note 1.)

And by the way, she had a big speckled hen - "des gorda-hinkel", (the garden-hen) that would fly over the fence, and would patrol that garden like a police-man on his beat - down one row, and up along the other. It would make an occasional scratch to dislodge a partly concealed worm or bug; but it would never scratch holes like most

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Lettuce! — "der Tse-lawt!"

To this was now added some finely pulverized manure from alongside the hog-pen, and also some very fine chicken-droppings, plus wood-ashes, soot, and a little salt. Granny had very little "book-larnin", but don't tell me that she didn't have her garden-chemistry down pat. This mixture was now scattered all over the lettuce-bed, in between the rows, and as close to the plants as we could get it. And the next day it rained. And did did that lettuce grow? It was closer to being black than green — it was that dark in color, and crisp and rich in flavor.



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chickens do. Then when it had a crop sticking out almost like a woman's breast, then it would fly out again. Strangers would look at it askance, and shake their heads. But to my knowledge to this day, I do not know of her doing anything to that hen, but to feed it like the rest of her small flock.

My cousin Rob always called it —: “der Mummy era. a-dittsidney glock”, (Granny's one-titted chick.)

I honestly believe that hen was older than I was; it didn't lay any more, but she insisted on keeping it.

When the lettuce was big enough to use, out we went with a kettle or a paw, and a sharp little knife. She would select only the largest plants; she would grasp the entire plant with her left hand, and then with the knife in her right hand she cut off the entire top, just above the ground. Then she'd leave a bunch and cut out another one; I carried the paw. A day or so later, she would repeat the process; in a weeks time these stumps would be growing nice new leaves; and by the time she had gone over the entire patch, it was ready for a second cutting.

And was that lettuce good once she put it on  
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the table? First shed go over it, leaf by leaf, and look for any dirt — particles of soil, bugs, aphids, or an occasional tiny green worm. Then it was washed and rinsed, and rinsed and washed, until there was nothing cleaner on God's earth.

"Now schneidt der schpeck!" (Now cut the bacon!)

And it was it always, just bacon. She would trim off the fat from a big ham and save it. Then I'd cut it in dice about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch square, and put it in a skillet, and she would fry it a nice golden brown.

She added some brown sugar, and some strong cider-vinegar, and put the lettuce in that boiling mixture and stir it with a fork. She would have potatoes boiled in salt-water; and with a heaping platter of them and that delicious salad on them, I would resemble a toy-balloon when I left that table.

Head lettuce was sowed in a cold-frame early in the spring, and was later transplanted. When it was fully grown a single plant when cut and placed in a dishpan, would fill it.

Along about July, she would sow endive seed; these were covered with old bags or carpet, and kept wet for a whole week; then, when it sprouted, she removed the bags, and when the plants had a few leaves they were transplanted about twenty inches apart.

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these were kept free from weeds, and frequently got a sprinkling of her home-mixed fertilizer, previous to a hoeing. By September these plants would be so big that they covered all of the ground, and they required no more weeding. Now she would tear up an old dress or perhaps a sheet into narrow strips, then I would hold up a plant with both hands, and she would wind that string around and around it, as tight as she could, and then tie the ends into a knot. Then it got another top-dressing and was hoed, and then it was left in peace, to bleach, or blanch.

When she wanted some "un-diffy" (endive) I would cut one plant and bring it in, and lay it on her table.

She removed the outside and soiled leaves, and then that entire plant was a nice pale yellow color all over. She would prepare it exactly like garden lettuce.

This endive would be stored in the cellar late in the fall; and a generous supply would end up — in "grout-luck", — (the cabbage-pit.)

"Wou mer der Tselawt grawsa doot mitt der mailicha heud, no grickt er mil-daw!" (If you weed the lettuce with flour on your hands, it will get mildew.)

When an individual plant would wilt and shrivel up and die, Grammy would say — "short but er hex  
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nei qschpouttet!" — (There a witch spit on it!)  
Then she would dig up that, and the adjacent plants,  
and burn them in the stove.

From where I lay on the floor, I could see her face  
silhouetted against the window, and I could see her  
lips moving as she dropped the plants into the  
flames in the open stove. When it was all consumed  
she replaced the stove-lid, put away the holder, and  
said —: "Now gricket selly oldt hitche muell bouchway  
— see hut my shainer Trebant ferhoust!" (Now that  
old bitch will get belly-ache — she spoiled my nice lettuce.)

When she noticed tiny red spots on some leaves on  
the lower side almost down on the ground, then she  
would say —: "Ise hut muell witter ainey fun unserm  
psuck de b — g eat!" (Here someone of our company  
had her time (monthly period))

Big cob-webs, she said indicated rain, and were  
good for any garden crop.

Strung on poles, located at each corner of the garden,  
were strings, tore from a sheet and knitted so the ends  
were several inches flapping in the breeze. "Selly doona  
de feggel, de befa, un der deivel drous holdta!"  
(Those will keep out the birds, the witches and the devil!)  
It scared the birds; as to the other two I have my doubts,  
but Grammy was positive in her belief.

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One more incident pertaining to this good vegetable, that I must tell of here. When we were starting out on our matrimonial venture, we dug and planted a garden, just about like the rest of us would do. We planted the various old stand-bys, and so we seeded a bed of lettuce.

At that time I used to mark off or make little furrows with the rake — (an old woodwone) by pressing it into the loose soil. These rows went in from the edge of the bed, crossways, so that the lettuce bed was as wide as the rake (or about thirty inches) and as long as the land was wide. This made it convenient for getting the lettuce, once it was grown, as one could stand in the garden-path or walk, and reach clear across the lettuce — "mer cov in gorden-wake shtay."

We had placed an order for seeds from a prominent seedsman, of proven honesty, and we had received all as ordered. We had three different varieties of lettuce, so we put one variety at one end of the bed, one at the other end, and the remaining one went into the middle. All of it grew, but the one variety was much better than the others; it was taller, much crisper, and sweeter, and was very much superior, having a peculiar tangy flavor to it. We had an occasional meal from the  
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(my wife + I)  
 other two, but we both wished, we had sowed only  
 this one variety.

Farm work kept me busy, so I did not get in  
 that garden as I was wont to do; but one Sunday  
 morning I strolled in, just to look around and see  
 how things were growing. And there in the middle of  
 that lettuce-bed were a number of wild chicory plants,  
 in full bloom. I grabbed one, and yanked it out of  
 the loose soil, roots and all. I took them, one at a time,  
 and I had the greater part of them uprooted, when I  
 heard my wife hollering at me from the second-story  
 window.

"Was doosht? Sh'tupp sell — rupp mimmy may —  
 Ich will selly-hoova!" (What are you doing? Stop it!  
 Don't pull any more — I want them!)

Then she told me that what I had pulled was what  
 she had left standing of that wonderful lettuce, and  
 had let it go for seed for next year's crop. But I  
 calmly pulled up all of it. I told her that if she  
 went down the hill to the old Gerber farm, she  
 could get all of that stuff without digging any  
 garden, and planting it. This is a common  
 roadside weed, viz. Chickory or sometimes called,  
 succory; in P. Dutch we call it "sig-gori or sic-oria."  
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Others call it "wildster on-diffey", (wild-endive) and this describes it better than any other name can do it.

If the plant is dug in the fall, and transplanted into a cellar or the basement of a barn or shed, they should be planted deep, the roots being cut into several pieces, and put in upright, and kept damp or moist.

In several weeks young tender shoots of a pinkish or cream color will come up; these are delicious to eat raw like celery or for salad.

The pioneers used the root of this plant as a substitute for coffee; the long tap-roots were washed, cut and dried, or roasted, and then ground, and used like coffee. While the flavor does not compare to good coffee, yet they could not afford to be choosy when the real stuff could not be procured.

Nowadays the elite can dine at some expensive hotel on Barbe de Capucin, munching to their hearts' content on the dainty fragile stems, and paying an exorbitant price for so doing. Had they known what they were eating they could easily have plucked enough of the same for a good meal, in some farmer's fence-corner. The weeds, when pulled up and thrown on a pile, will sprout, and keep on growing, if some of the lower ones are on the bare ground. These sprouts are the same, minus the high-faluting name. July, 6th. 1953 Der Oldt Bauer.