

A hotbed gives seeds a jumpstart



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BETWEEN THE ROWS

The other day my horse looked at me and smiled. Well, maybe not, but it looked like it to me. She knows how much she is helping my gardening efforts by providing lots of fertilizer.

Once I left fertilizer in the barn in a big pile over by the door. I had cleaned the floor and piled it by the door, knowing that I would get back later that day to pick it up. Two days later, I saw it smoking and about to catch fire. I could have burned the barn down!

Shoveling it out rapidly, I touched the shovel near my foot and burned myself.

This action is the oxidation of the ammonia component of the manure. I guess that is why they can make bombs using ammonia compounds.

The oxidation in the pile in the barn was accelerating from a slow oxidation to a rapid one (fire is rapid oxidation, which only happens when an oxygen supply is available).

A hotbed is slow oxidation because oxygen supply is limited, so it is enough heat to take the chill off of the soil — similar to using a heat mat under potting soil to germinate seeds more rapidly.

Build a hotbed using fresh manure. We used horse manure. Dig a deep hole and put a substantial amount in the bottom. Add a deep layer of soil (this prevents the manure from having free access to oxygen), put a wooden frame around it and cover it with a window frame.

The window lets in light and also keeps heat in. In the 1970s that's how I started tomatoes from seed outdoors early in the season.

The slow oxidation puts out enough heat to give the seedlings a head start. Actual heat is given off through the chemical reaction of the manure ammonia breaking down as it oxygenates. The ammonia salts leach out slowly with time and water.

All the organic fibers and nutrients left in the manure from the animal's incomplete digestion loosens up the soil and helps the soil hold onto water. That's why "rich dirt" builds up around barns.

It's a great idea to add manure to a compost pile, as the plant material needs nitrogen to decompose. The heat from the manure will kill bacteria, virus, or fungus contained in the plant waste.

The whole reason that compost or manure is added to soil is to loosen the soil so the tender plant roots can get air. Nothing will grow in compacted soil, not even weeds.

Consider how a path forms: many trips back and forth and the air is pounded out of the soil. Compaction is one of the most damaging things we can do to the fertility of our soil.

Loosen your soil with: compost, manure, spading, raking, hoeing or using a spading fork; or consider stepping stones and stay on the path.

Maybe my whimsical black mare had reason to smile, and maybe if she's very patient, I may just catch on!

Garden chores

- Prune fruit trees. Apples and pears first. Peaches, nectarines, and apricots should be pruned just before they bloom.
 - Seeds of slow-growing annuals like ageratum, verbena, petunias, geranium, coleus, impatiens, and salvia may be started indoors.
 - Sow seeds of larkspur, sweet peas, Shirley poppies, and snapdragons where they are to grow outdoors.
 - Dormant sprays can be applied to trees and shrubs. Do this on a mild day when temps are above freezing.
 - Save grape vine prunings to make attractive wreaths.
- Happy gardening and thanks for reading!

Celebrate spring with strawberry pie

By **BEN MIMS**
Los Angeles Times

Although strawberries scream "summer" to most people, to me they carry a lot of BSE: Big Spring Energy. That's because growing up in the South, the first strawberries of the year hit markets in early March. And while those early-season berries weren't as sweet as those that came at the start of summer, I always loved them more. Their slightly sulphuric, sour flavor made them ideal for baking since it helped to cook them down with sugar so as to make them as candy-like as their late-season siblings.

The early-spring strawberries are now in Southern California, along with all the mania that manifests when everyone returns to a specific fruit at the perfect time of year to eat it. I mostly refuse to eat strawberries throughout the rest of the year, waiting for those first berries of spring to kick off the season that lasts until the last super sweet berries leave in the summer. And right now, all I want to do is bake things with these new berries.

My current baking project is a cold pie that incorporates the cooked-down strawberries into a "Black Forest" flavor profile, a request from my partner. Instead of using cherries, which I often find need a lot of help to coax that enticing "red" flavor from within, early-season strawberries have the robust, tangy flavor I want — when cooked and condensed, the acidity balances all the sugar and allows for an exponentially greater berry-full flavor.

To complete the inspiration, I spread a layer of chocolate pudding over the jammy berries, followed by a layer of whipped cream to cut all the richness. In that last layer, I use cornstarch and gelatin to help set the whipped cream and prevent weeping — when water separates from the dairy fat — which can happen as it sits. It's a technique — to help set the whipped cream on the outside and keep it stable, sliceable and soft — I learned from making a traditional Black Forest cake.

First you make a pudding by cooking a small amount of milk with cornstarch and sugar, then you dissolve gelatin into the pudding and, finally, fold it into the whipped cream to stabilize it. It may seem unnecessary, but when you work so hard on a pie like this, you want to ensure it sets up and comes out looking beautiful with each slice — now is not the time for those fashionably floppy pie fillings.

The crust is an homage to chocolate-flavored Teddy Grahams cookies, which have the perfect lite-chocolate flavor I'm after, and are balanced with the earthiness of graham crackers. But because they're often difficult to find, I came up with my own amalgamation of the cookies using plain graham crackers and cocoa powder to mimic the flavor. With all the intense fillings above it, this crust is refreshingly tame in comparison and a pinch to make since rolling out pastry would be overkill here.

To garnish, I use some simple shaved bits of chocolate and, if I want to really impress (I always do), a sprinkling of ground freeze-dried strawberries. It's a luscious, sensual pie using a berry that, for now, is happy to play with other strong flavors until it's ready to show its sweet side.



Susana Sanchez/Los Angeles Times-TNS

The arrival of strawberry season calls for a celebratory cold strawberry pie.

STRAWBERRY FOREST PIE

Recipe by Ben Mims
Time: 2 hours
Yields: Serves 8

Tart, early-season strawberries replace cherries in this creamy and cold "Black Forest" pie. The jammy berries add brightness to the rich chocolate pudding layer above, while the cream layer offers a reprieve from the intense flavors below. This pie uses gelatin and cornstarch to set the cream layer so that it slices cleanly and evenly with each serving. Serve this pie chilled with extra fresh strawberries on the side, if you like.

For the crust:
140 grams (1 1/4 cups) graham cracker crumbs
1/3 cup granulated sugar
3 tablespoons Dutch process cocoa powder
1/8 teaspoon fine sea salt
6 tablespoons melted unsalted butter

For the strawberry layer:
147 grams (12 ounces) strawberries, hulled and quartered
3 tablespoons granulated sugar
1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt
2 teaspoons cornstarch
1 tablespoon water
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
For the chocolate pudding layer:
3 tablespoons granulated sugar
1 tablespoon cornstarch
2 large egg yolks
3/4 cup whole milk

3 ounces bittersweet chocolate (preferably 70%), finely chopped
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt

For the cream layer:

1 1/2 teaspoons unflavored powdered gelatin
1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons whole milk, divided
2 tablespoons granulated sugar
2 tablespoons cornstarch
1 cup chilled heavy cream
1/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
Finely ground freeze-dried strawberries and/or grated dark chocolate, to garnish

1. Make the crust: Heat the oven to 350 degrees. In a large bowl, add the cracker crumbs, sugar, cocoa powder, salt and butter, and mix with your fingers until evenly combined. Transfer the mixture to a 9-inch metal pie pan and press evenly into the bottom and sides of the pan. Bake until darkened a shade lighter at the edges, about 10 minutes. Transfer the crust to a wire rack and let cool while you make the strawberry layer.

2. Make the strawberry layer: Combine the strawberries, sugar and salt in a small saucepan. Place over medium heat and cook, stirring every minute or so, until the strawberries have mostly collapsed, there are no rigidly solid pieces left and there is plenty of syrup around them, about 10 minutes. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, stir together the cornstarch and water. Pour the cornstarch slurry into the berries, and continue cooking until the liquid thickens (some of the berries will break down into the syrup), about 1 minute. Remove the pan from the heat, and stir in the vanilla. Scrape the strawberries into the pie crust and spread into an even layer. Let cool while you make the chocolate pudding layer.

3. Make the chocolate pudding layer: In a small saucepan, whisk together the sugar and cornstarch, then mix in the egg yolks. Add the milk, and stir until smooth. Place the pan over medium heat and cook, stirring constantly, until the pudding begins bubbling, about 4 minutes, then keep cooking, stirring constantly, until the pudding is thick, about 1 minute more. Remove the pan from the heat, and stir in the chocolate and butter until both are melted and smooth. Stir in the vanilla and salt, then scrape the chocolate pudding over the strawberry layer. Spread into an even layer and let cool completely.

4. Make the cream layer: Sprinkle the gelatin over the 2 tablespoons milk in a bowl; let sit until gelatin softens, about 5 minutes. Whisk together the sugar and cornstarch in a small saucepan, then add the remaining 1/2 cup milk and place over medium heat. Cook, stirring constantly, until mixture thickens to the consistency of very thick pudding, 4 to 5 minutes, then remove the pan from the heat, and stir in the gelatin mixture until it dissolves fully. Scrape the gelatin mixture into a large bowl and let cool, stirring occasionally, to room temperature.

5. In a medium bowl, whisk the cream and vanilla until stiff peaks form. Add one-third of the whipped cream to the gelatin mixture, and stir until smooth. Add the remaining whipped cream, and gently fold with a rubber spatula until evenly combined. Scrape the whipped cream over the chocolate layer, and smooth the top. Cover loosely with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 4 hours or overnight.

6. When ready to serve, sprinkle the top with chocolate shavings and/or ground freeze-dried strawberries. Serve immediately while chilled.