

WHERE HAS ALL THE RHUBARB GONE?

Tapping away at my hospital computer, entering medical data for hundreds of patients a day, can become monotonous and my thoughts are prone to wander. Today, out of the blue, I turned to Ann at the next desk and said, "Where has all the rhubarb gone?" She looked at me as if I had finally lost it. But here's the deal:

In the summertime when my mother and I were young, we lived on a ten-thousand acre cattle ranch in a remote canyon in Southeastern Utah. In the evenings when the sun was casting a golden glow across the green fields, and all of our chores were done, my mother and I would each take a tin bucket and go exploring. We would walk across the alfalfa with the sun to our back, and our shadows long in front of us and go to find something good to eat. When we came to the ditch bank we could find rhubarb by the bushel. We also found peppermint to make fresh tea, as well as wild currants, both red and black. Gooseberries were there, plump and juicy. We would fill our buckets and return to the house by dark, avoiding the coyotes, mountain lions, bears and foxes that came out at night to kill and eat the deer which came to the fields under cover of darkness. In the morning we would wash our rhubarb and boil it up with sugar and lemon juice and make delicious pies to be eaten with fresh cream from the cow we milked. Sometimes we would make jam out of the berries to be spread on thick slices of hot bread right out of the oven. Peppermint tea, freshly brewed, with hot bread and jam and home-made butter is as close to heaven as anyone can get.

The memories of my mom and me walking through the fields with the sunlight in our hair brighten my days. When I tell my children about all of this they are entranced. They especially love the part where I tell them about taking some oats in the buckets to feed an interested horse or two and then jumping on the horses without saddles or bridles and riding them back to the corrals. I think sometimes they think it is all made up or a good dream I have had. But it's all true.

Now we have sprinkling systems with huge pipes and big round wheels to move them across Utah ranches. This is efficient and much better for the fields. With an even flow of water, the alfalfa grows rich and green and Utah farmers are happy. But now the ditches are empty and weeds grow in them where water used to flow. Now there is no more rhubarb or tea or berries growing on the banks. I wonder what the mothers and children do in the evenings in the summertime. Walking through the fields, my mother and I could talk about anything. It was our magic time together after all of the work and stressors of the day were put away until the morrow. Now, when do the mothers get a chance to chat one-on-one with the children, uninterrupted by phones, computers and television? Do the children go to bed remembering that they saw a giant hoot owl and its babies in a tall pine tree or a doe with twin fawns? Is summer still magic? And,

Where HAS all the rhubarb gone?

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