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Zone 4

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7 BACKYARD BEAUTIES p46

AMEND YOUR SOIL p52



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The restaurant at Chico Hot Springs Resort is highly regarded for its use of local foods, and in this case, local means the garden out back, which features a variety of greens for super fresh salads.



TENDING A RESTAURANT GARDEN

At Chico Hot Springs Resort, the culinary team includes the gardener

Laura Prindiville

“Have you met Harry Belafonte?”

“Huh?” I answered. I wasn’t certain I’d heard Jeanne Duran correctly. For an amateur like me, the gardens at Chico Hot Springs Resort in Southwestern Montana are a feat beyond my wildest ambitions. To stand in its geothermally heated greenhouse, listening to Jeanne describe the meticulous planning and work that goes into tending the gardens, was already a little intimidating. But I could make no sense of her question.

“Have you met Harry Belafonte?” she repeated. “He’s right over here.” She gestured toward a lush Meyer lemon tree (*Citrus meyeri*), its branches laden with fruit.

I laughed. “Why did you name him Harry Belafonte?” Jeanne told me that when she asked Eve Art, the owner of Chico, what they should name the tree, Eve responded, “Harry Belafonte.” Right then, I knew this was no ordinary garden. Later, I remembered that he recorded Peter, Paul & Mary’s classic folks song, “Lemon Tree.”

A GEOTHERMAL HOT SPOT

Every year the restaurant garden at Chico turns out hundreds of pounds of greens, herbs, tomatoes, cucumbers and other vegetables for its award-winning dining room and convention center. In Montana’s harsh climate—short seasons with chilly

nights, erratic weather, and blustery winds—one might find it is amazing that the Chico staff are able to produce anything at all, but sustaining a restaurant garden here is easier than you might imagine. All you need is really great gardeners, a little ingenuity, and the good fortune to live on top of a geologic hiccup that provides a steady stream of piping hot water into your greenhouse.

Chico sits at the base of Emigrant Peak in the beautiful Absaroka Mountains. Just shy of an hour’s drive from the north entrance to Yellowstone National Park, it shares the geothermal bounty that has made the park famous. Located at the intersection of various faults, the greater Yellowstone region is one of the most active and diverse geothermal sites in the world. Water from deep below the earth’s surface is heated by magma. Pressure forces the water upwards and it bubbles to the surface in springs and hot spots like Chico. Native Americans, prospectors, and western wanderers enjoyed bathing in these waters for hundreds of years before the Chico Warm Springs Hotel opened in 1900. Its outdoor pools have been a regular resting spot for weary travelers and locals ever since.

Gardens have been a part of life at Chico since its inception. At one point in its history the resort was largely self-sufficient. Chico generated its own electricity and a



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5-acre garden supplied fresh fruit and vegetables to the hotel’s dining room in the summer, and root vegetables and preserves to see them through the long winter. After a series of owners, the gardens and the resort fell into disrepair. Only after Eve and Mike Art purchased the hotel in 1973 and set forth to rehabilitate it did the gardens come back to life.

“We had all this hot water and had a really hard time getting fresh vegetables and herbs to serve in the restaurant,” says Eve, “so I just started talking to various people. There was a lot of support for the idea.”

The greenhouse design is startlingly simple. Timber-framed end walls support two layers of poly film stretched tight over a metal frame. It looks like a Quonset hut made out of plastic wrap. To reduce heat loss, a small blower inflates the space between the two layers of plastic. While the majority of the heat is produced by a propane heater, the 112°F water piped from the nearby hot springs runs through a maze of heating pipes throughout the lower part of the walls and about 12 inches beneath the surface of the soil. The geothermal heat adds about 10°F to the overall temperature of the greenhouse so that the climate inside is fairly tropical.



Chico Hot Springs Resort is located at the base of Emigrant Peak, in Paradise Valley, about 50 miles north of Yellowstone National Park. In addition to vegetable gardens, gardener Jeanne Duran tends roughly 80 planters on the grounds. Wave petunias (Petunia x hybrida) are a favorite.

MAXING OUTPUT IN THE GREENHOUSE

The Arts are fortunate to have head gardener Jeanne Duran as their manager in the greenhouse and gardens. Duran tends Chico’s garden full-time, year-round. In the summer, she employs at least two additional staff to tend the gardens, flower beds, and baskets throughout the resort. In the winter, her focus shifts to the greenhouse where she cuts back last year’s growth, cleans up, plans for the upcoming season, and waits for the avocados to ripen.

Besides the avocado tree, there is a banana tree, three figs, blooming jasmine, scented geraniums, passion vine (*Passiflora*), the aforementioned Meyer lemon tree, lemon grass, several orchids, and a stunning flowering hibiscus. For such a small

space, the variety of flowers, vegetables, fruits, herbs, and ornamentals is astounding. To get such a variety, Jenne orders seeds and starts, and trades cuttings and seedlings with friends. The hibiscus was a donation from the pastry chef. The passion flower was planted from seed by a former gardener, the new red passion flower was a trade with a friend's mother in Yuma, Arizona. The banana tree came from a local who grew it as an ornamental but was frustrated by its lack of fruit.

Due to the limited space in the greenhouse, the yields from some of the more exotic plants are simply not large enough to be usable for the dining room and convention center. Only once did they get one bunch of bananas which ripened enough to eat and share. While the exotic plants certainly add to the aesthetic experience of the greenhouse, Jeanne has to focus on things that can be grown and used in the kitchens: primarily greens, herbs, and edible flowers. Nevertheless, executive chef Matt Jackson says, "It's

surprising how much stuff does come from there. Thanks to the work of gardeners both past and present, the garden becomes more productive every year."

It's a juggling act in the greenhouse. In spring, it is packed to the rafters with pallets of delicate starts and seedlings. Chico starts all its flower baskets from seed in early March as well as plants for the outdoor garden, like onions, Brussels sprouts, and beets. During the summer, when the greens, vegetables, and flower baskets move outside, the planning of greenhouse space continues. "I have to decide who gets to go where," Jeanne says of the cucumbers, tomatoes, and basil that compete for space, and more importantly, sunlight in the small greenhouse. The high humidity and warm night temperatures (unlike the outdoor garden) ensure that yields of the dedicated "kitchen crops" are considerable. One bed of cucumber or tomatoes, grown vertically on strings suspended from the ceiling, can produce hundreds of pounds of produce before the summer ends.



CLASSIC SPINACH SALAD

The Chico Hot Springs Resort restaurant is known for its fresh and delicious salads. In her book *A Montana Table: Recipes from Chico Hot Springs Resort*, author Seabring Davis calls the following recipe its "signature salad." The spinach, of course, is grown at the resort.

Creamy Italian Dressing:

- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons Italian herb seasoning
- 2 tablespoons granulated garlic
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 1 1/2 cups half-and-half

- 1 pound spinach
- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup bacon, browned and chopped
- 2 eggs, hard boiled and chopped

To prepare Creamy Italian Dressing: Blend mayonnaise, Italian seasoning, garlic, and sugar in a blender. With machine running, slowly drizzle in olive oil and then vinegar. Gradually add half-and-half and blend until smooth. Chill until needed.

To prepare salad: Toss dressing with spinach and onion until leaves are coated. Divide between plates and top with bacon and eggs.

Executive chef Matt Jackson preps vegetables for the day's soup.

“I love having fresh oregano, fresh thyme, rosemary, basil, pineapple sage, fresh fennel, fresh everything. We can just go down and cut it two minutes before service and it’s fresh and ready.”

OUTDOOR GARDENS

While the greenhouse is impressive, to a struggling Montana gardener like me it does seem a little like cheating. It is always warm and the humidity is perfect. From my perspective, the most impressive feat is the stunning quarter-acre vegetable and herb garden behind the main hotel. The garden is striking, not only for its productivity but also for its beauty. Hops drape the tall fence surrounding the garden. Herbs, lavender, and cut flowers are everywhere. Even in the off-season, berry brambles, dried flowers, and late-season crops lend a feel of efficiency and delight.

At the height of the growing season Duran dedicates at least a dozen beds in the outdoor garden just for salad greens—a cut-and-come-again mix that changes throughout the year—and spinach, a Chico staple. Jeanne grows ‘Tyee’ spinach (*Spinacia oleracea* ‘Tyee’) because it is slow to bolt, holds well, and tastes good. Other crops include radishes, peas, beets, carrots, chard, kale, cabbage, onion, garlic, leeks, Brussels sprouts, Asian greens, squash, and arugula. They also have an established asparagus bed, rhubarb, a highly productive raspberry crop, plum trees and, my personal favorite, a heart-shaped garlic bed. Each summer, the garden crew experiments with new varieties just “because it’s fun.” Sometimes they make it to the plate and sometimes they just chalk it up to experience.

A native of South Boston, Jeanne learned much of what she knows the old fashioned way: by trial and error. “There is pretty much



nothing she won’t try,” says Eve. Her academic background consists of an eight-week Montana Master Gardener course, then taught by Dr. Bob Gough at Montana State University. After that, says Jeanne, “I guess, I just got to work with and learn from a lot of good people. I’m interested, and I think that’s the best way to learn.” Fact is, Jeanne has worked with some of the best in the business: Dave Jensen of Native Landscapes and Reclamation, landscape designer Linda Iverson, and Hillary Roth Taylor, former owner of Rosedale Gardens, all in nearby Livingston. She continues to learn from those around her, including all of the gardeners working with her at Chico. While her horticultural education may have been non-traditional, the ideas and techniques she employs in the garden are based on solid theory and best practices.

Head gardener Jeanne Duran tends the tomato plants in the Chico greenhouse. At right is the Meyer lemon tree, dubbed ‘Harry Belafonte.’



Soil is sifted through a wire screen and into a wheelbarrow for transport to the beds.

“As gardeners, we are always wanting to try something new.”

Jeanne is an ardent fan of the work of Elliot Coleman whose book, *Four-Season Harvest* (Chelsea Green Publishing Co., www.chelseagreen.com), is a must-have for short-season, high-altitude gardeners. In addition to writing, teaching and lecturing on organics and agriculture, Coleman and his wife Barbara Damrosch operate a commercial year-round market garden in Harborside, Maine. Coleman’s work goes beyond simply trying to extend the season. It is about gardening and eating in a manner appropriate to each season, an idea echoed in the crop choices you see at Chico. Coleman advocates year-round gardening, using simple greenhouse technologies, cold-hardy vegetables, and succession planting. *[In future issues, Zone 4 will publish several excerpts from Coleman’s latest books, as well as an account of a recent visit with him—Ed.]* While Duran’s objective is to increase yields and variety for the dining room and convention center, Coleman’s techniques are equally effective in the home garden as well.

CHEF AND GARDENER ARE A TEAM

At Chico, the gardener and chef work together. “As gardeners, we’re always wanting to try something new,” says Jeanne, although her trials have sometimes met with mixed results. In winter, she shares seed catalogs with Matt Jackson

as well as Morgan Milton, the chef at Chico’s convention center. Because the menu at the convention center is somewhat more flexible, they often can use more of the experimental varieties than Jackson can in the main dining room. If someone is dining at Chico for the umpteenth time says Duran, “People expect the spinach salad the way it is.”

Besides space constraints and viability, gardener and chef consider which items will have the biggest impact on the plate. “The fresh herbs are the biggest thing for me,” says Jackson. “I love having fresh oregano, fresh thyme, two different kinds of rosemary, four different kinds of basil, pineapple sage, rub sage, dill, fresh fennel, fresh everything. We can just go down and cut it two minutes before service and it’s fresh and ready.” And it sells. Whenever the kitchen makes a special dish where even just some of the ingredients come from the garden, the wait staff makes certain the customers know about it. Generally, it’s the first menu item they run out of. “If you can go to a table and tell them that they can order a Caprese salad with tomatoes and basil grown in the greenhouse, or if I make a compound butter with fresh herbs that all came from the garden, I take so much pride in doing that.” And the customers respond.

Jackson and his staff take produce from the garden very seriously. “I see it as my responsibility to use what they



Inside the greenhouse, Duran grows her eggplants on strings, as well as the cucumbers and tomatoes. Overhead is the passion vine.



*Duran built a shelter for hot peppers (*Capsicum annuum*): Thai Hot, Super Chili, Anaheim, and Jimmy Nardello. Unfortunately, a strong wind later picked it up and smashed the frame.*

bring up. I'm never going to let it go bad. They work so hard. For us to let it go to waste would be shameful." Of course, this isn't always easy. As Jackson points out, many of the vegetables that thrive in Chico's garden aren't necessarily staples of the American diet: celery root, turnips, parsnips, beets, and Brussels sprouts. "A lot of people don't like Brussels sprouts," he comments, "but ours are amazing."

While the Chico gardens parallel a movement both nationally and regionally to eat more locally, the garden and greenhouse at Chico are more than simply a nod to restaurant trends. Together they serve as part food supplier, part historical connection, and part aesthetic experience. They are an essential part of the culture and experience that make people want to return to Chico time and again. A good deal of what is grown there will never see the dining room, but to wander through the gardens at the height of the growing season, eat a raspberry plucked straight from the bush, sit on a quiet bench and watch the steam rise off the springs, that can't be measured. As Eve told me, "It's an oasis on an otherwise barren landscape." 🍷



Located behind the main hotel building, the 1/4-acre outdoor garden is set behind hop-covered walls.