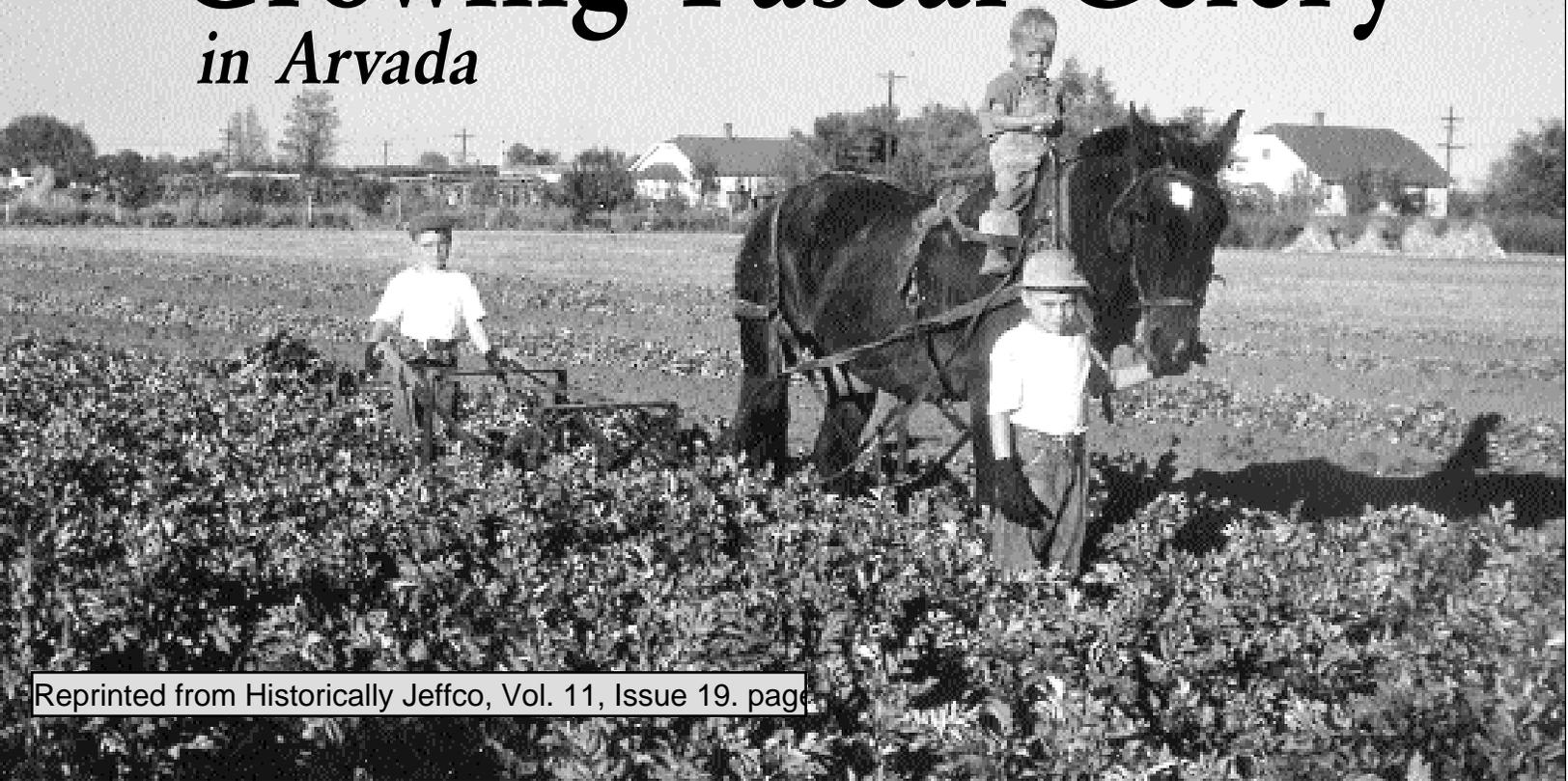


# Growing Pascal Celery in Arvada



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By Lawrence Lotito

My father and mother, Rocco and Concetta Lotito, and their four children, Rocco Jr., Vincent, Lawrence and Lucille, moved to Arvada in 1932. They bought 30 acres of land from descendants of the Juchem homesteaders, just east of the Ridge State Home, and south of the railroad tracks.

The land was unimproved; a term used to describe land on which crops such as wheat, alfalfa, etc., were grown, compared with more labor intensive fruit and vegetable truck gardening. This particular farm was on the ridge and the soil was a heavy "adobe," a contraction of the word adobe, a sticky clay texture that required much humus to become friable. This was accomplished by annual applications of cow-manure straw obtained mostly from Gibson's Holstein Farm Dairy on 32nd street in Wheatridge (before they

separated the words). Rocco Lotito was aware of the necessity of cash flow, so he planned his crops that something was harvested throughout the year.

Leaf spinach and radishes were sown and harvested in April and May. Hotbed plants and pansies in



Miss Betty Lee Plumlee admires celery  
*The bunch won first prize for Vincent Lotito.*

Threatening rain clouds failed to keep more than 5,000 Jefferson County farmers and ranchers from the opening day of the 13th annual Arvada Harvest Festival yesterday. Yesterday's activities began at

senior Chambers of Commerce and county extension agents, will be distributed among prize winners today. The festival is held every year to display agricultural resources and progress of Jefferson County

May, asparagus in June, and a fairly large crop of strawberries in July, followed closely by head lettuce, rhubarb, turnips, cucumbers, white and yellow squash, tomatoes, eggplant, and green peppers as the season moved into August. Then more turnips, beets, carrots, rutabagas, Parsnips. The later root crops were pulled up, topped and stored in pits of about a foot deep, 3 or 4 feet wide and 10 feet long. Then the excavated soil was piled over the root crops, to be uncovered, washed and marketed in December. The exception were the parsnips, that were left in the ground, as the frosts made them sweeter.

But pascal celery was the prince of the crops. Every body said there was good money in it, and it was the primary crop of most Italian-American truck farmers in the Arvada Clear Creek valley. The hope was that celery would be

harvested and sold for 75 cents to a dollar a dozen. A 100% crop at \$1 a dozen would have grossed nearly \$3,000 per acre. It never happened! Grass-hoppers, disease, and failing markets all took their toll. In 1938, the farm grossed about \$1,200 for the whole 30 acres!

### The Celery Growing Year: Preparation and Seeding Operations

Raising the crop took nearly the whole year. Celery was seeded in the hot beds in late February/early March, a process that required covering the glass paned sashes with cat-tail reed mats (woven in January) every night, and uncovering them every morning. Cat tail reeds were cut in late September, dried on banks of the swampy streams, bundled up and kept until winter days provided time for weaving the mats. A six by four foot loom (rack) was constructed, holes bored about a foot apart in the six foot horizontal 2x4s, and creosoted twine strung top to bottom, held



in place with pegs in the holes at the top and looped around hooks in the bottom 2x4. About six feet of extra twine was balled up at the bottom hooks. A handful of reeds was placed horizontally along the base of the rack; the extra twine was brought up and around the taut pegged twine, half-hitched, and jerked tight. This was repeated for each cord across the rack, and then another handful of reeds was added and the process repeated, until the four by six mat was completed. The edges were cut square with a curved “banana”

knife, extra twine trimmed, and the mat folded once to a more manageable 2 by 6 foot item.

The hot beds were made of redwood 1 by 10 inch planks set on edge into the soil into a frame six feet wide and fifty or sixty feet long. Cross pieces of 2x4s every five or six feet held the frame rigid. Glass paned sashes six feet long and four or five feet wide were placed across the frame, trapping the sunlight and heating the soil. The mats were thrown over the glass sashes and unfolded every evening to retain as much of



**Upper Left:** The celery cutter in operation on Rocco Jr.'s place with his three young sons. Note the three trenches already filled in the back ground. The horse was Beauty, which Rocco Jr. took with him when he moved to farm on his own. Beauty cost about \$10 or \$15 in 1930 or 1931.

**Lower Left:** Newspaper clipping from the Rocky Mountain News, showing Vincent's 1st prize winning entry of pascal celery at the Arvada Festival, September 13 or 14, 1940.

**Upper Right:** A view of the hotbed area where the celery plants were sprouted and nursed until transplanting. Note the cat-tail mats to the right, folded and stacked between the beds, the barn and horse corral in the background, and to the left, the corrugated iron shed, with the closed-in part (shown again in picture on page 22), where the celery was washed. The little white structure in the background was an outdoor two holer, offered by the WPA for \$15.00. They provided the materials and labor as a depression help to the job-less (about 1935).

**Left:** Rocco Lotito, Sr. trimming celery in December. Notice the celery in lettuce crates which were taken to the shed in the extreme right background. Note, again the horse corral, WPA structure, and barn in center background (about 1935).



**Left:** Rocco Lotito Sr., with son Vincent, displaying a bunch of 12 stalks of prize-winning celery, which is noted behind the picture as selling for 90 cents because of a hard freeze that occurred. (probably late 1930s).

**Lower right:** A trench, and mature celery from Rocco Lotito Jr.'s farm on 64th and N. Washington.

## Transplanting and Growing Operations

A horse drawn cultivator drew parallel 30 inch furrows in the fields, which had earlier been plowed, disked, harrowed, and floated. When ready to transplant, the seedlings were watered, carefully up-rooted, and, strangely, the roots were washed free of the hot bed soil. This was to make the planting operation more speedy and manageable. With about 30,000 plants per acre, this was a formidable task. The Lotitos usually had 5 to 7 acres in celery. The plants were placed in apple boxes, covered with a wet gunny sack and taken to the field.

Water from the Juchem ditch was turned into several of these furrows, say, a 100 yards long, and when the water reached nearly to the end, the celery planter took a bunch of the seedlings in his left hand, and with his right pointer finger pushed a hole in the soil at the water line, then took a plant, inserted it, and in a final motion, pushed the wet mud around the roots. Eight inches along the waterline, the process was repeated, and so on. If you didn't already have a strong back, you soon developed one! Finger nails wore tissue-paper thin, and the finger got sore. One could switch to the middle index finger, but this was awkward. A pistol shaped dibber was available, a metal point with a wooden handle, but it simply wasn't as fast, and was disdained.

Perhaps machismo?

As the seedlings took hold, the furrow in which they were planted was hoed in, and a new irrigation furrow was cultivated down the middle of the rows. Depending on weather, the fields had to be irrigated every 10 days or two

the warmth as possible. Long poles were placed over the mats to hold them in place from the winds. In the morning the process was reversed. Snow falls complicated the process!

### Seeding and Growing the Plants

After the hotbeds were constructed, usually on good soil that had been well fertilized from previous years, the soil was worked and raked over several days to an especially fine condition. Shallow rows, about two inches apart, were pressed into the tilth, and the celery seed was sprinkled down each row. A piece of gunnysack, a jute fiber sack in which potatoes were usually packed, was swished lightly back and forth over the seeds, providing just enough

coverage for the germination of the celery. This was hand dampened with a sprinkling can, as a hose sprinkler was too difficult to control, and the seeds might be washed from where they were sown. It took 10 days to two weeks for the seeds to germinate, and the beds had to be carefully watched to prevent drying out.

After they came up, the seedlings had to be thinned out to a maximum of four or five to the inch, and carefully watered (too much and they would blight, with insufficient root development). When the plants had about match stick thickness in early May, they were ready for transplanting to the open field.

weeks. To conserve the moisture, the rows were horse cultivated 2 or 3 days after each watering. Weeds were hand hoed once or twice during the season.

If the season was rainy, there was danger of rust as the plants matured in September. This was a fungus invasion of the leaves and stems, causing brown leaves and streaks on the stalks. The plants were sprayed with a mixture of copper sulphate and slaked lime—Bordeaux Mixture. This was effective, but the entire plant had to be misted, and the back-packed, hand-pumped, mist sprayer had to be carefully applied.

### **Harvesting and Marketing Procedures**

By late August, early September, the plants were maturing and a marketing decision was necessary on whether to aim for the Thanksgiving or Christmas sales period.

### **Papered Celery For November Thanksgiving Market**

Thanksgiving celery was papered with sheets of the Denver Post—the tabloid form of the Rocky Mountain News required two sheets instead of the Post's one. The paperer raised all the outspread leaves and stalks, held them up with his shins, ankles, and left hand, while he deftly wrapped the paper around the plant with his right hand, tying the paper with cotton twine. The worker had pre-cut 14 inch twine segments in bundles of 120 - 240. This was held along his left arm with rubber bands. As he papered, he would whip off a strand of twine, go around the papered celery, and tie a square knot. Soil was heaped around the plants to reduce air entering from the bottom of the paper sheath.

Three to four weeks after papering, the stalks were blanched, and celery could be cut or

harvested. A horse drawn cutter severed the stalks an inch or two below the crown, but the individual stalks had to be hand trimmed. A sharp eight or ten inch knife was used to cut off the roots and sucker growth around the main stalks, usually with three strokes of the blade, leaving the saleable celery to be put into a container, and taken to the shed. Here the celery was washed and placed on a bench. A couple of upright pegs held the 12 plants, and a blue ribbon was tied around the celery at the bottom and again higher on the stalks. These bunches were packed in paper lined lettuce crates and readied for market the next morning.

### **Trenched Celery For the December Christmas Market**

Christmas celery had to be trenched, usually last of September, first part of October. A trench would hold about six



rows of celery, cut about 2 inches below the crown so that some of the root system was retained. This required a horse drawn special implement, with a 20 inch wide blade under a robust iron frame and wheels in front, arching over the plants so as not to damage them.

Workers took the plants and shook off most of the soil, placing them in two long parallel rows, leaving space between them for the trench. For this, a U-shaped steel blade, fastened under a railroad tie beam, with cultivator handles to the rear to steady the implement as the horse drew it along, loosened the soil, which was then hand excavated. The resulting trench was about a foot deep and 10-12 inches wide.

A team of three did the actual trenching; one man stood in the trench and took the celery from the other two, one on each side, who alternately handed him the plants with the leaves and stalks pulled upright. The trench man took them and placed them in the trench and tamped them in place with the back of his heels. His pant legs were tied with twine to facilitate the action.

After the trench was filled, the excavated soil was pushed back against the protruding leaves, the trench then covered with straw and topped with chicken house straw litter and manure, which was supposed to decompose and provide some heat. From the time of trenching to the harvest in December, the outer leaves of the plant also decomposed and fed a new heart growth, which was naturally creamy white and marvelously crisp. This was a preferred product to the papered celery, which was not so much

new growth, but blanched by cutting off the sunlight from the stalks.

Harvesting the trenched celery was sometimes a very cold job. Because of the decomposed outer leaves, it was a rather slimy job, and when it was cold, one's hands became numb. Rocco Sr. used to exhort his sons to work longer, saying, "If you can put your finger tips together, you can still work."

Both products were rather unique. We believed the Arvada/Wheatridge area was the pascal celery center for the country. A prime bunch of the celery was usually sent to the White House for Christmas by one of the shippers. A great deal of pride was associated with having the best celery.

Vincent Lotito won the blue ribbon first prize at the Arvada Harvest Festival September 13 -14, 1940. This was celery that had obviously been papered in early August to be ready for the festival.

World War II was now raging, and the very labor intensive crop was abandoned because it simply became too expensive to grow. During the 30s, the hired hands were paid \$1.25 to \$1.50 per day! With men called up into the military, shortage of labor caused wages to go up. Other crops which could be better managed with machinery took over. The Lotitos chose carrots as the primary crop, although Rocco Lotito Jr. moved with his wife and children to a farm at 64th and N. Washington, continuing to grow celery in the old way through at least the 1940s.

Two or three small farmers still cultivate and harvest the trenched celery for the Christmas market. Joe Calabrese and his son, Joe, Jr., do this in the old fashioned way, at 5280 Carr Street in Arvada. And it tastes just as marvelous as ever!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Lawrence (Larry) Lotito was born in Denver on May 10, 1921. He graduated from Arvada High School in 1939, and earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Chemistry, Mathematics, and Physics at the University of Colorado. Larry earned a further degree at UCLA in Meteorology. During his military career, he served 6 1/2 years of active duty in WWII and the Korean Crisis, and retired as Major in 1981. After a long and interesting civilian career as meteorologist, station manager and district transportation manager in Rome, Italy, and at Heathrow Airport, London, England, and after having been decorated by the Italian government for his work with the Italian Meteorological Service, Larry left TWA in 1972 to join the Marriott Corporation as Director of Operations in Rome. Lawrence Lotito became Vice President of Operations and General Affairs for Europe, Italy, Africa, and the Middle East. He left Marriott for International Catering Consultants in 1974. There he formed Air Cuisine Ltd., which developed airline kitchens in the London and Glasgow areas. In 1983, he became owner of the company, which he sold in 1986 when he retired and returned to Arvada. He married Patricia Walsh in 1945. He is happily married and has five children, one son and four daughters.

Lawrence Lotito is the winner of the second prize of the 1998 Writer's Contest.

