

RHUBARB

Rhubarb is a hardy, cold season perennial vegetable. It is grown for its tart, succulent leaf stalks that are usually cooked like fruit for sauces, pies, jams, preserves and wine. Rhubarb also cans and freezes very well for eating out of season. First cultivated in the Far East 2,000 years ago: originally for medicinal purposes but in the 18th century was grown for culinary in England and America. Rhubarb requires a temperature of 40°F to break dormancy and stimulate spring growth. It does best with average summer temperatures of 75°F.

Varieties

Rhubarb varieties are divided into two groups, those with red stalks and those with mainly green stalks. Green stalked varieties are somewhat larger and more vigorous. They include 'Victoria', 'German Wine', and 'Suttons' Seedless'. Red varieties include 'Ruby', 'McDonald', 'Valentine', 'Canada Red', 'Crimson Wine', 'Cherry Red', and 'Strawberry'.

Bed Preparation

- Since rhubarb is a perennial it needs to be in an area that normal garden work doesn't disturb. It needs a sunny location with deep, well-drained fertile soil with good organic material and clear of weeds.
- Before planting, cultivate soil and mix a handful of 5-10-10 fertilizer for every plant and add manure and compost. An application of 3-4" of manure or compost worked in at planting is beneficial.

Planting

- Rhubarb is usually grown from roots or crowns purchased through catalogs or from local garden centers. Roots are also obtained by division of older plants. (See below.) Rhubarb seed is not recommended because new plants often don't match parent plant.
- In early spring plant roots when leaves are just beginning to bud out about three feet apart. Place crown no more than two inches below soil surface. Firm soil and water deeply. Once plant is up and growing, add 3" of compost or straw to help control weeds. Rhubarb may be planted in the fall (after dormancy has set in), but spring is preferred.
- One to two vigorous plants will generously feed a family of four.

Care

- Rhubarb needs frequent and deep watering, moist but not soggy especially during dry weather.
- Rhubarb is a heavy feeder. Plants should be fertilized twice a year. In early spring just before growth begins, apply one to two pounds balanced fertilizer (5-10-10) per 100 square feet and manure. Repeat application in mid-summer.
- In the fall, after frost kills the tops, dig down eighteen inches on two sides of each plant (about twelve inches from center) and add two shovels of manure or compost and cover with soil.
- Remove seed stalks as they appear so not to deplete reserves and support growth. The plant will produce longer and better.

Division

- Rhubarb can be divided when it is six or more years old.
- Plants may be divided spring or fall, but spring is preferred. For spring division it is helpful to mark the location before plant dies back in the fall. Dig down 6" around base and lift out entire crown. Some roots will break off and can be left in the ground.
- Using hands, hatchet or machete, divide roots so that each section (about the size of a fist) contains at least one strong bud. Small pieces can be combined to make a larger crown. Don't allow roots to dry out during division/planting process. Store in refrigerator if one can't plant right away and rehydrate by soaking in water for 2 hours before planting.
- Vigorous plants will produce 5-10 new root sections. Very old plants may have only outer fringe of usable buds. Discard woody center.

Harvest

- **Do not** eat rhubarb leaves. They contain oxalic acid and can cause severe poisoning. But they can be composted with no negative effect to compost pile.
- **Do not** harvest stalks the first year as the plant's crown needs to be established. The second year, harvest for only two to three weeks. Third year and after begin harvest as soon as stalks are large enough. Continue harvesting in May and June until hot weather or until stalks decline in size and quality -- usually about six to ten weeks as reserves are getting low.

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- Rhubarb is ready when stalks are about ½ inch in diameter or larger. However, very large stems are often tough and dry. Leave small stalks to grow. Harvest stalks when leaves expand and when stalks are young and most flavorful!
- Do not remove more than 1/2 of developed stalks at any one time to leave foliage to sustain the crown.
- **Do not** cut stalks or roots may be damaged. Grip stalks near base and pull up and twist slightly to one side so that stalks snap off clean resulting in a spoon shape at base.
- Rhubarbs can be stored in a refrigerator crisper in a perforated bag for 2 weeks.

PESTS and DISEASES

- Rhubarb Curculio or Rusty Snout Beetle can cause damage to stalks. Crown rot is more a problem in commercial applications.

Information can be found at: <http://hortsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu/Home/HortsenseHome.aspx>