



RHUBARB

Culinary rhubarb (*Rheum rhabarbarum*) is a long-lived, hardy, cold season perennial vegetable in the buckwheat family (*Polygonaceae*) that is traditionally treated as a fruit in the kitchen. Rhubarb is grown for its tart, succulent leaf petioles (stalks) that are cooked for sauces, pies, jams, preserves, and wine. For eating out of season, rhubarb freezes and cans well. Native to Asia, rhubarb species (*Rheum* genus) were first cultivated in the Far East 2,000 years ago. It was originally grown for medicinal purposes. Beginning in the 18th century it was grown in England and America for culinary purposes. Rhubarb is rich in vitamin C and dietary fiber, has low sodium content, and has 26 calories per cup of diced stalk.

Rhubarb is a temperate crop that requires cold winter temperatures to stimulate spring growth. A temperature of 40°F is required to break dormancy and begin spring growth. Rhubarb grows best with average summer temperatures around 75°F. Its large frilly leaves add a tropical feel to any landscape.

Varieties

Rhubarb varieties are divided into two groups, those with mainly green stalks and those with red stalks. Green stalked varieties are somewhat larger and more vigorous, including Riverside Giant, Victoria, German Wine, MacDonald, and Strawberry. Red varieties include Valentine, Crimson Red, Canada Red, Crimson Wine, Cherry Red, Crimson Cherry, and Tilden.

Bed Preparation

- Rhubarb is a perennial that needs to be planted in an area where normal gardening work won't disturb it. Grow rhubarb as a landscape plant away from trees and shrubs. It can reach eight feet in diameter or more. Full sun is recommended but some afternoon shade is beneficial for rhubarb in the Spokane area.
- If the planting area has not been tested for fertility, it is recommended to do so before planting and amending. Fertilize rhubarb based on soil fertility test results as recommended.

- Spokane area soils are not typically phosphorus deficient. It is recommended to cultivate the soil to a depth of 10 inches before planting and mix in the soil-test recommended fertilizer for each plant, then add three to four inches of manure or compost for extended nutrition.

Planting

- To ensure growing a plant identical to the parent, 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 as described below.
- Growing rhubarb from saved seed is not recommended because new plants often don't match the parent plant.
- In late winter/early spring, as soon as the soil can be worked, plant the roots about three feet apart when leaves are just beginning to bud out. Place the crown two to three inches below the soil surface. Gently tamp the soil and water deeply. Once the plant is up and growing, add three inches of compost or straw around, but not covering, the crown to help control weeds and conserve water. Rhubarb may be planted in the fall after dormancy has set in, but spring is preferred in the Spokane area.
- One or two vigorous plants will generously feed a family of four.

Care

- Rhubarb needs frequent and deep watering. Keep the soil moist but not soggy, especially during hot, dry weather.
- Rhubarb is a heavy feeder and may need to be fertilized twice a year. In early spring, just before growth begins, apply manure and fertilizer as recommended by soil test. Repeat the application in mid-summer.
- When summer temperatures reach 90°F, leaf production slows down and the plant may enter summer dormancy. Continue watering to keep the soil moist but not soggy.
- In the fall, after frost kills the tops, add compost or aged manure for nutrition and organic mulch to maintain a three-to-four-inch depth for weed prevention.
- Stress may encourage flowering and seed production. Stress is caused by infertile soil, extreme heat/cold, or drought. Seed formation depletes nutrient reserves and suppresses plant growth. Remove seed stalks when they appear. The plant will produce a longer and better yield with the seed stalk removal. Older plants are more likely to flower than younger plants.

Harvest

- **Do not** harvest stalks the first year when the plant is establishing the crown. The second year, harvest for only two to three weeks. Beginning with the third year, start harvesting as soon as stalks are large enough. Continue harvesting in May and June until hot weather begins or until the stalks decline in size and quality, usually after about six to ten weeks when nutrient reserves are getting low.
- Rhubarb is ready to harvest when stalks are about ½ inch in diameter or larger and leaves begin to lie horizontally. Harvest the larger stalks first. Very large stalks are often tough and dry. Leave small stalks to grow. Harvest stalks when the leaves expand and when stalks are young and most flavorful.
- Do not remove more than one third of the developed stalks at any one time to ensure enough foliage to sustain the crown.
- Grip stalks near the base then pull up and twist slightly to one side so the stalks snap off cleanly, leaving a spoon shape at the base. **Do not** cut stalks when harvesting. Cutting instruments can introduce pathogens and the resulting stubs are pathogen entrance points.
- Remove the entire leaf from each stalk and compost. **Do not** eat rhubarb leaves. Leaves contain toxic levels of oxalic acid and can cause severe poisoning. In compost piles, the leaves break down to harmless, helpful nutrients and do not pose a problem.
- Rhubarb stalks can be stored in a refrigerator crisper in a perforated bag for two weeks.

Division

- Rhubarb can be divided when the plant is overcrowded. This can often be done around six years or older. Dividing large crowns can renew vigor to the plant.
- Plants may be divided in spring or fall, but spring is preferred in the Spokane area. For spring division, it is helpful to mark the location before the plant dies back in the fall. Dig down 6" around the base and lift out the entire crown. Some roots will break off and can be left in the ground.
- Using hands, hatchet, knife, or machete, divide roots so that each section contains at least one or two strong buds. Small pieces can be combined to make a larger crown. Don't allow roots to dry out during the division/planting process. Store in refrigerator if planting is delayed and rehydrate by soaking in water for two hours before planting.
- Vigorous plants will produce five to ten new root sections when ready for division. Very old plants may have only an outer fringe of usable buds. Discard the woody center after dividing the root appropriately.

PESTS and DISEASES

- An insect, Rhubarb curculio, also known as Rusty Snout Beetle, can cause damage by boring holes into roots and stalks. A useful control measure is to remove weedy grasses and dock plants (*Rumex* spp.) from the area. These plants are the normal hosts for this insect.
- Aphids may be present and can be removed with a strong spray of water from a hose.
- A wet year or poorly drained soil may attract root-rotting fungi. Planting in **well-drained soil** helps to avoid these soil dwelling pathogens.