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. Grown originally for medicinal purposes, beginning in the 18th century it was grown for culinary purposes in England and America. 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 garden work won’t disturb it. Growing rhubarb as a landscape plant away from trees and shrubs is encouraged, as it can reach eight feet in diameter or more. It needs a full-sun location with deep, well-drained, aerated, weed-free, fertile soil with good organic material. Some afternoon shade is beneficial for rhubarb in the Spokane area.
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- 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. If recommended, cultivate the soil to a depth of 10 inches before planting and mix in the soil-test recommended fertilizer for each plant, then add 3” to 4” 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 soil surface. Gently tamp the soil and water deeply. Once the plant is up and growing, add 3” 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. However, do not add any transplant supplements, including fertilizers, unless you have soil test results showing a nutrient deficiency later in the season.

- 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 3”- 4” depth for weed prevention.
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- Stress, in the form of infertile soil, extreme heat/cold, or drought, may encourage flowering. Remove seed stalks when they appear. Seed formation depletes nutrient reserves and suppresses plant growth. The plant will produce longer and better with seed stalk removal. Older plants are more likely to flower than younger plants.

Division

- Rhubarb can be divided when the plant is overcrowded, often 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 5-10 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.

Harvest

- Do not eat rhubarb leaves. They contain oxalic acid and can cause severe poisoning. They can be composted without negative effect on the compost pile.

- 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.
C119 - Rhubarb

- Remove the entire leaf from each stalk and compost. While leaves contain toxic levels of oxalic acid, in compost piles, the leaves break down to harmless, helpful nutrients and do not pose a problem.

- Do not cut stalks when harvesting. Cutting instruments can introduce pathogens and the resulting stubs are pathogen entrance points. 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.

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.
- Once rhubarb is infected by pathogens, it is recommended to move the plant to a more appropriate site or discard the plant and purchase new stock for a more appropriate location.

For more information, see Dr. Chalker-Scotts fact sheet FS360E: Growing-rhubarb-in-home-gardens