

Rhubarb - Serve It Up!

by Carol Barany

'Days to harvest' listed on the seed packet or plant tag is a good indicator of how long you'll have to wait following planting until your crop is ready to pick. 'Early Girl' tomatoes need 55 days, but you'll have to wait 80-100 days for Brandywines. Some quickly maturing lettuce varieties will be ready in as little as 35 days, but it will take almost two months for peas.

While cooler temperatures will make the first harvest later this year, fresh rhubarb will be ready in just a couple of weeks.

Where I grew up, every backyard had a rhubarb patch, flourishing for generations without much attention. After all, this is one tough perennial, hardy to Zone 1. When fresh fruits weren't widely available year-round in cold climates, rhubarb's piquant freshness was a welcomed herald of spring.

The story has been repeated so many times that it's been elevated to folklore status in the Barany family. My husband's mother, waiting for him to speak his very first word, was expecting something conventional. Imagine her reaction when he clearly enunciated "woo-bowb" instead. Mama's little baby loved rhubarb, and clearly, he wanted more.

Some tastes never change. For almost 40 years now, years, John harvests his own rhubarb. He turns the first crimson stems into the simple, succulent sauce of his childhood, which he spoons warm over vanilla ice cream. Later, he'll fire up the steamer/juicer and decant gallons of sweetened rhubarb juice, to be poured into icy glasses of tonic water or lemonade all summer long.

Our son William makes gorgeous pink rhubarb simple syrup. He uses it in everything from gin and tonics to mojitos, but it works equally well in non-alcoholic smoothies and milkshakes. He even concocted a frozen rhubarb daiquiri recipe for me, since after a long day of gardening, I like my cocktails to taste like Slurpees.

I treasure a tattered and stained recipe, cut from the 'Places and Faces' column of the Herald-Republic, at least 25 years ago. That week, Berkeley's Chez Panisse, the restaurant now regarded as the birthplace of the farm-to-table food movement, was sharing their recipe for

Strawberry Rhubarb-Walnut Crisp. <http://hellgatecsa.net/blog/20070611/rhubarb-strawberry-crisp>.

We especially love this treat because along with the rhubarb, we grow strawberries and walnuts in our garden. Just one bite is all it takes to it to convert some of the most adamant rhubarb haters.

Ready for some rhubarb? Look for plants in garden centers this month. Its gorgeous ruby stems and dramatic foliage could land it a place as an ornamental in the most sophisticated garden bed.

Plant the roots with the crown bud 2 inches below the surface in well-draining, manure or compost enriched soil, spacing them 36-48" apart. One or two plants is plenty for a family of four. Divide old plants when they begin to crowd themselves by slicing the roots into pieces with a sharp spade, just when the leaves are emerging. Each division should have at least one strong bud. Apply a complete fertilizer before growth begins in the spring and side-dress with a high-nitrogen fertilizer in late June. Irrigate as you would the rest of your garden. Organic mulches help moderate soil temperature and preserve moisture. In late fall, more manure or compost is helpful, but avoid covering the crowns.

Rhubarb shouldn't be harvested during the first year because new plants need all their foliage to build a strong root system. In the second year, harvest for 1 or 2 weeks, and for 8 to 10 weeks (a full harvest season) during the third and following years. Harvest from spring to early summer, before the stalks begin to toughen, and stop picking well before the last frost to allow the plants to store strength for winter.

The best stalks are 10 to 15 inches long. Grab the stalk down near the crown and give a twist and pull to the side, cleanly snapping it off. Leave no stubs. The leaves contain large amounts of oxalic acid, making them poisonous, so trim them off. To keep the plants vigorous and productive, remove only about one-third of the leaves from a plant at any one harvest. If seed stalks and flowers develop, cut them from the base of the plant as soon as they appear.

Rhubarb is available in green or red-stemmed varieties, but the choice was easy for me: who wants green pie? I'll take my rhubarb crimson-pink.

As they used to say on NPR's *A Prairie Home Companion*: "One little thing can revive a guy, and that is home-made rhubarb pie. Serve it up, nice and hot. Maybe things aren't as bad as you thought".