

Rhubarb

Rheum rhabarbarum

Unlike most crops grown by home and community gardeners, rhubarb is a perennial plant that is easy to grow, especially in the northeast where it prefers the cool weather. Rhubarb requires some chilling over winter to break dormancy and resume growth in the Spring so it's best when grown in areas where temperatures fall below 40 degrees F.



Rhubarb is grown from roots (or corms) and not seeds. You should start with a section of root that has one or more buds or eyes. These are the points from which growth will begin. The roots should be planted in early spring as soon as the ground can be worked.

Be sure the planting area is weed-free and in full sun. The soil should be well drained and amended with organic matter such as composted manure. Plant root sections three to four inches deep with the buds/eyes two inches below the soil. Rows should be four to five feet apart with two to three feet between plants. Three to five plants should provide plenty of rhubarb for an average family.

Rhubarb plants are heavy feeders and should be fertilized regularly. An application of well-rotted manure or compost in early spring and again in early summer should do the trick. Rhubarb also needs sufficient moisture particularly throughout the dry summer months. Lay straw mulch around the plant to keep weeds down and retain soil moisture. Keeping the area around the plants well weeded will help you avoid problems with insect pests and disease. Although rhubarb is not susceptible to many problems, crown rot can occur if rhubarb is planted in poorly drained soil.

It's important to remove any flowers that form because they sap the plant's energy and lessen the quality of the stalks. The edible portion of the plant is the leaf stalks (or petioles). **The leaves are poisonous and should never be eaten.**

When the leaves first appear, they're very crinkly but smooth out as they expand. The flavor of the stalks is best if they are harvested just before all the crinkles disappear from the leaves. To harvest, grab the base of the stalk and pull it away from the plant while gently twisting it. Be sure to always leave at least two stalks on the plant to ensure continued production. Never harvest any stalks from a plant in its first growing season, and only lightly harvest stalks in the second season. Stop harvesting when the plant begins to produce thin stalks; this means the plant's energy reserves are low. The harvest period should run about eight to ten weeks.

There are green, pink and red varieties of rhubarb and, generally, the redder the stalks, the more tender the rhubarb. Some good red varieties include Valentine, Crimson Cherry, and Canada Red. Rhubarb stalks are juicy and have a rich, tart flavor. Many people choose to soften its tang with a little sugar or maple syrup. Mixed with strawberries and a touch of sugar in a flaky pie crust is the ultimate rhubarb experience - absolutely delicious!

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