



Rhubarb: An Important Perennial Crop For the Home Vegetable Garden

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Rhubarb (*Rheum rhabarbarum*) is a popular garden perennial grown for its large, thick leafstalks, which are cooked and used in pies, sauces, and other desserts. It is a long-lived plant that is practically indestructible. Only the leafstalks should be eaten; the leaves contain calcium oxalates, which can cause swelling and discomfort in the throat, and can be poisonous.

Planting Site. Rhubarb will grow in many types of soils but prefers one that is high in organic matter. Because it is a perennial vegetable, it should be planted at the side of a vegetable garden and preferably in a sunny, well-drained location. Before planting, spade the soil to a depth of 8 to 10 inches and incorporate manure, compost, or other organic matter, and add one pound of a complete fertilizer (or comparable organic fertilizer) for each ten feet of row.

Setting the Plants. Rhubarb crowns are available at garden centers and nurseries or through mail-order sources. They can be planted as soon as the soil can be worked in the spring. There are numerous cultivars. The most common are 'MacDonald', 'Canada Red', 'Valentine', 'Ruby', 'Crimson Red', and 'Cherry Red'; all of these have red leafstalks. Three or four plants will supply the average family with enough rhubarb for fresh use and preserving. Each plant will yield about 6 to 8 pounds per season. Set the plants so that the buds are 1/2 to 1 inch below the surface of the soil. Space the plants 2 to 3 feet apart in the row and allow 4 to 5 feet between rows. Firm soil around and over the crowns.

Care During the Season. Rhubarb is one of the easiest vegetables to care for. If rainfall is less than an inch per week during the first season, water the plants to get them established. Irrigation is especially critical in the spring when the crowns are getting established. Maintain even moisture throughout the growing season, but avoid waterlogged conditions. Fertilize each year by applying a complete garden fertilizer in early spring or side-dress fertilizer in late June.

Weeds can be controlled by shallow cultivation around the plants and by using a mulch. Mulch around the plants not only reduces the weed problem, but it also protects the roots in winter. It should be pulled back in early spring to allow the soil to warm up and to speed growth.

The plants will occasionally send up large, white seedstalks during the growing season. Although these are quite impressive and ornamental, they should be broken off and removed as soon as they form because they deplete food reserves.

Harvesting. The leafstalks are at their prime in early spring. Do not harvest any stalks the first year; in the second year, harvest only a few stalks and allow the rest to grow and feed the roots. An established planting can be harvested for about eight weeks; for most varieties, pull only the largest stalks - those over an inch in diameter.

Some gardeners are cautious about using rhubarb during the summer months. Stalks can be cut as long as the plants are vigorous and productive, but leave several on each plant to provide reserves of food. Also, remember that the quality may be lower than that of rhubarb grown in the spring.

To harvest, grasp the stalk firmly and pull it from the base of the plant. Some gardeners prefer to cut the stalks close to the ground with a sharp knife to avoid damaging the crown.

Rhubarb should not be harvested when the leaves are wilted or limp after a hard freeze not only because the leafstalks acquire a poor flavor and texture, but also because the leaves and eventually the stems may become toxic.

Pests and Diseases. It is fortunate that few pests attack rhubarb in the home garden. The most harmful insect of this plant is the rhubarb curculio, a rust-colored beetle that bores into the stalks, crowns, and roots. Because this beetle also attacks dock, a common weed in Illinois, it is important to control grassy and large-stemmed weeds growing near the garden.

The most serious disease of rhubarb is crown rot, which reduces the vigor of the plant and can eventually kill it. Start with vigorous crowns and plant them in a sunny well-drained site.