

# The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

April 2009

## Rhubarb: An Old Favorite

Elizabeth Wahle, horticulture specialist

Often known as “pie plant”, rhubarb (*Rheum* spp.) is a hardy perennial that thrives in the fertile, well-drained soils of the Midwest. Rhubarb is grown for its thick leaf stalks or petioles, and several varieties are available. Some still have the greenish stalk common to the old-fashioned rhubarb, but several of the more recent introductions have quite red stalks. A deep red petiole tends to be more popular with gardeners, but green varieties tend to be more productive. Some people assume that red-petiole rhubarb is sweeter than the green-petiole types, but petiole color does not determine sweetness. Some varieties commonly available are ‘Canada Red,’ ‘Green Victoria,’ and ‘MacDonald.’

Planting crowns should be done in the early spring as soon as the ground can be worked. Planting seed is generally not recommended because of the time to establishment and the strong possibility that the seedlings would not be true to type. Select a sunny location that is appropriate for a long-term planting. The soil should be weed free and worked to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. Set rows 5 to 6 feet apart, and in the rows, plant 3 feet apart. Crowns should be shallowly planted, no more than 2 inches below the surface. If rainfall is less than an inch per week, water the plants. This is especially critical in the spring when the crowns are getting established. Because rhubarb is a cool-season plant, growth is best with temperatures below 90°F. Temperatures above 90 degrees result in suppressed growth and plants may even appear dormant during periods of extreme heat. Following a season of growth, the rhubarb crowns become dormant, and they require temperatures below 40 degrees to break dormancy the following spring.

The leafstalks for harvesting are in their prime in the early spring. Do not harvest the first season of growth. During the second season, harvest only a maximum of four weeks, and seasons thereafter, harvest can continue for eight to 10 weeks. For any harvest, never remove more than ½ of the developed stalks from any plant at any one time. This will allow the plant to build up reserves for the next cutting.

Some caution needs to be taken when harvesting and preparing rhubarb. Cut the leaves from the stems and leave them in the garden or add them to your compost pile. **Under no circumstance** should they be eaten because they contain oxalic acid, a poison. Don’t harvest wilted or limp stalks from frostbitten plants. Severe cold injury may cause oxalic acid crystals in the leaves to migrate to the stalks, increasing the likelihood of poisoning problems. If in doubt after a frost, compost frostbitten stalks and wait to harvest after new stalks have been produced.

To harvest, firmly grasp the stalk and pull it from the base of the plant with a slight twist. Some people like to cut the stalks close to the ground with a sharp knife to avoid injury to the crown; but, this is not the preferred method because the petiole base left behind can decay and create a site for fungal invasion.

To receive  
*The Green Thumb*  
by mail, contact  
your local  
U of I Extension office.  
[www.extension.uiuc.edu](http://www.extension.uiuc.edu)



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
EXTENSION

*Continued on Page 3*

# Landscaping with Vegetables

David Robson, horticulture educator



If you long for home-grown vegetables but don't have a lot of space, you can integrate vegetables into your landscape.

The first thing you have to change is the mindset that vegetables do best when planted in nice straight rows or in a large plot. Some, like sweet corn and green beans, do. But, it's not true for all of them.

Many vegetables can be tucked in among shrubs and flowers. Patches of lettuce and spinach need only a square foot here and there. If planted early in the spring, the space can be used for flowers or other vegetables later in the season. Since most leafy vegetables are in for only eight to 10 weeks, you can plant some late-season annual flowers to fill in the same space.

Peppers also work well interspaced among flowers. The reds, oranges, and purples of the fruit will add a little zip to the landscape. The newer one- to two-person eggplants also do well, producing vivid purple or white fruit to contrast or complement surrounding flowers and foliage.

Many of the root crops, from radishes to carrots to beets to parsnips, fit in well. You'll need a little more patience when planting to make sure the seedlings are properly spaced. Place two seeds in each location, thinning down to one plant if both germinate. Remember not to deeply hoe or cultivate around the plants.

Many of the root crops have interesting foliage, including the fern-like carrots and the large reddish-green beets.

Tomatoes also work well tucked in among other plants. You may need to stake or cage the plants, but that isn't much of a problem if done when the tomatoes are small. Beyond the red slicing types, consider some of the pink, orange, and yellow cultivars as well as plum and cherry types. Because cultivars with a determinant growth habit will not grow out of bounds

and need minimal support/staking, they are preferred over the indeterminate types.

'Bright Lights' Swiss chard is a vegetable with a multitude of various colored stems. This plant can add a certain pizzazz even if you don't harvest the leaves.

Most gardeners grow the bush snap beans, but pole beans probably fit better in a landscape border because they'll climb up above the other plants, essentially sharing the same space but at different levels.

Broccoli planted in early spring produces heads by mid-summer; then, you can pull up the plants and replant with another vegetable. Broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower can also be planted in late August for a fall crop, replacing vegetables or flowers that are past their prime.

Vining crops like cucumbers and cantaloupes can be trained on fences, supported by old nylon pantyhose or foam-covered twist ties. Plant the seeds in hills close to the base of the fence and allow the plants to ramble up. The weight of some plants may be too much for some old fences, so make sure the fence is secure.

For years, herbs have been mingled with flowers. Dill, fennel, sage, rosemary, and basil are ideal for flower gardens.

When planting herbs and vegetables, read the seed packet or transplant tag so that you know how much room the plant needs to properly grow. Don't fudge; if cabbages need 18 inches by 18 inches, don't try to grow them in a square foot.

Look for seeds or transplants that are described as compact or smaller than normal. And when possible, select cultivars that are resistant to pests and diseases.

Regardless of where and how vegetables are planted in your yard, monitor for pests and use appropriate control measures as if the plants were in standard garden rows.

# Question Corner

Answer provided by Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator

**Q.** When should bulbs that bloom in the spring be fertilized and cut back?

**A.** Spring bulbs respond well to annual fertilization. A granular fertilizer can be used when the foliage begins to emerge early in the spring. Use a “bulb” fertilizer that contains moderate amounts of nitrogen and potash (such as 10 to 15 percent each), and low levels of phosphorous (5 percent). Spread the fertilizer around the plants and, if possible, lightly scratch it into the soil surface; follow with watering.

A general guideline is about 1 pound of fertilizer per 100 square feet of bed area. After the blooms have faded, follow with a liquid soluble fertilizer at one-half the recommended mix rate, and apply one or two times before the foliage begins to yellow.

When planting new spring bulbs or transplanting existing bulbs in the fall, work in bone meal or other source of slow-release phosphorous. Mix it 6 to 10 inches deep below the planting level of the bulb, where the roots can utilize it.

Do not clip or mow bulb foliage until after it turns yellow and dies down naturally. Depending on species, this can be a month or more after bloom. The foliage needs adequate sunlight to ensure proper development of next year’s flowers. If foliage is mowed or clipped too early, bulb and blooms will decline over time, and may die out.

Some bulb species readily develop a seed head at the base of the flower if the bulb is pollinated. Clipping off the developing seeds and seed stalks will divert more energy to growth and formation of new bulblets and flowers for next year.

After the foliage dies down in late spring or early summer, the bulb goes dormant through the summer months. With fall rains, the bulb comes out of summer dormancy and roots begin to grow again to provide nutrients and moisture to the bulb.

If you want to transplant and move your bulbs to new locations, do so after they enter dormancy.

Tulips should be dug after the foliage dies in the late spring and replanted in the fall. The original tulip bulb dies, so there is a need to sort and replant only the largest bulblets that have formed.

Daffodil and crocus should be dug and replanted about every five years to prevent over-crowding. The first sign of over-crowding of daffodils will be a decrease in the flower size. When this occurs, dig after the foliage dies down in early summer and immediately replant the bulbs.

For more information, visit the SI Gardening website at <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/regions/hort>.



---

Send your lawn and garden questions to:

The Green Thumb  
c/o Annette Campbell  
U of I Extension  
1212 Route 14 West  
Benton, IL 62812

E-mail:  
[mdcampbe@illinois.edu](mailto:mdcampbe@illinois.edu)

---

---

*From Page 1*

Occasionally, the plants will send up seedstalks during the growing season; these seedstalks should be removed as soon as they form so that the plant is not expending unnecessary energy.

After plants die down in the fall, heavily mulch them with compost, being careful not to cover the crowns. After several years, rhubarb will begin to crowd itself out, and spring is the best time to renew the bed. Lift the oldest plants first and remove any dead or damaged portions. Cut the crown into sections, each with a healthy piece of root and at least one good bud. Plant these pieces back in a prepared bed.

# Forsythia is an Early Spring Delight

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



Forsythia is one of our early blooming plants that provides a somewhat wild, informal look in the landscape. It also offers a refuge to birds during the winter. And, during the cold winter months, you can take cuttings from the shrub and force them to bloom indoors, giving you an early touch of spring.

These plants grow best in full sunlight but will tolerate light shade. They also prefer a well-drained site.

Forsythia is relatively free of insect and disease problems. Starting your own plant is quite easy as well. Cut off a 6- to 12-inch piece of new growth and place it in water.

After roots start to grow, transplant the cutting in its place and keep it watered.

Forsythia is one plant that looks great naturally. If pruning is needed, it is usually done after spring bloom because flowers are on older stems. By waiting until the flowers fall, new stem growth is easier to identify and leave for next year's bloom.

Prune older limbs to the ground and head back other stems to hold the plant to the size desired.

The great thing about forsythia is that it requires little attention if planted in an out-of-the way location. Although some gardeners shun its short floral display, it has merit as an early spring floral delight.



## In this Issue

**Rhubarb: An Old Favorite**

**Landscaping with  
Vegetables**

**Question Corner**

**Forsythia is an Early  
Spring Delight**

*The information in this newsletter is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products and trade names do not constitute endorsement by the University of Illinois and do not imply discrimination against other similar products that are not listed.*

University of Illinois~U.S. Department of Agriculture~Local Extension Councils Cooperating  
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

If you need special dietary or disability accommodations to participate in any programs listed in this newsletter, please contact your local U of I Extension office.