

Rhubarb: Queen of the Northern Perennial Vegetable Garden

Bob Olen, Horticulturist

Rhubarb is truly a treasure for northern gardeners. While taken for granted and often the source of jokes because of its tart flavor, rhubarb is among the most versatile and easily grown garden vegetables. Rhubarb only grows well where winter temperatures are cold enough to drive frost into the ground. I guarantee that you will miss it if you move south.

Selecting Rhubarb Varieties

Most people are not aware that there are literally hundreds of rhubarb varieties available.

Varieties with bright red stalks (petioles) have become the most desirable. Canada Red and Valentine are two red-stalked varieties that are excellent and available through catalog sources. Victoria has green stalks tinged with red and is also readily available. Occasionally, local greenhouses also sell rhubarb grown from seed or from root division.

Plants are divided in the early spring and can often be purchased at local garden club plant sales. It is best to be certain that the variety you are purchasing has the plant vigor and the stalk color that you desire. You are never quite sure what you are getting if you buy bare roots unless it is a named variety purchased from a reputable dealer.

Planting and Dividing Rhubarb

Timing: Divide or plant crowns when the plant is still dormant. (Many people will refer to the crowns as “roots,” but they are really stem tissue and crowns.)

Late April is an ideal time to divide and plant.

Planting New Roots: Plant new roots early in the spring. Plant the crown bud

about two inches below the soil surface. Space the plants three to four feet apart for most vigorous growth. It is not recommended to plant from seed because it takes too long to get established. Obtain crowns from catalog or local sources.

Dividing Old Plantings Divide old plantings early in the spring while the plants are still dormant. It is best to divide a vigorously growing plant and replace weaker plants. Divide a large crown into seven to eight pieces, each of which has at least one strong bud. Be sure that no portion of the crown is rotted. If some of the crown is rotted, just cut it off with a sharp knife. Crown rot is an indication of an extremely old plant or poor soil drainage. *If crown rot is evident, it is a good idea to transplant into a better drained_location.* Plant the crown pieces with the strong bud about two inches below the surface. Plant each piece three to four feet apart. Plant on a site where there is full sun and good drainage. If necessary, create a raised bed of soil to improve drainage, but do not plant near the edge of the raised bed, as winter frost may penetrate and damage the crown.

Unknown Fact: It is a good idea to divide rhubarb patches every five or six years. This will regenerate the plant and greatly improve yields. Only replant one third of the planting each year. This way you will have a continuous harvest, since you will not be harvesting the stalks of the new planting the first year and will harvest lightly in the second year.

Fertilizing Rhubarb Plants

When establishing a new planting, add some well rotted manure or compost into the planting hole. This will provide a steady and slow release of nutrients during the first year. Don't use synthetic (chemical) fertilizers during the first year.

With an established planting, it is a good idea to supply a fertilizer source for the plant in the early spring, just as growth begins. You can spread well rotted manure around the plant stalks as they emerge or lightly sprinkle a chemical or

synthetic fertilizer around the plant. Rhubarb grows very fast in the early spring, so try to get the fertilizer to the plant by May 1st.

Summer Care

Rhubarb requires very little care after it is established. Shallow cultivate to eliminate any annual weeds. Water in July and August if the summer is warm and dry. That's it!

Harvesting

Rhubarb is a spring and early summer vegetable. Always stop harvesting by July 1st so that the plant can recover and begin to store sugars in the crown and roots for the winter. *Do not harvest any stalks during the first year of a new planting.* You can harvest for one to two weeks during the second year, and then you can harvest for the full season during the third and subsequent years.

Rhubarb Myth Busters

Partial myth: Rhubarb plants are poisonous. The stalks of rhubarb are never poisonous. The leaves contain oxalic acid, which is an irritant and considered to be non-edible or "poisonous." The leaves should be cut off and composted. The composting process renders the oxalic acid harmless.

Myth: Rhubarb stalks are poisonous if harvested after July 1st. Rhubarb should not be harvested after the first of July, but not because of the quality of the stalks. Once again, the stalks are never poisonous, but stop harvesting after July 1st so that the plant can store carbohydrates for the next season. If you just have to have another mid-summer rhubarb pie, go ahead and harvest a few more stalks. Follow this up by applying a layer of compost or well rotted manure around the plant and then water to give it some additional nutrition for the leaves that remain.

Myth: Rhubarb never freezes in the spring. Occasionally, an unusual late spring "freeze" (less than 25 degrees Fahrenheit) can damage rhubarb leaves and stems.

Light frosts are easily tolerated. If temperatures of less than 25 degrees Fahrenheit are forecast after the plant's leaves are fully emerged, it would be a good idea to cover it with a bed sheet or similar fabric "blanket."

Myth: Rhubarb is never grown from seed. Rhubarb is generally propagated by crown and root division in early spring. The plant often develops "seed heads" on stalks that grow from the plant throughout the season. Plant breeders will cross-plant pollen from separate adult strains to produce unique plant seeds. The new rhubarb variety is grown from seed initially and then propagated from root division in subsequent years.

A note on rhubarb seed heads: if seed heads form, it is a good idea to cut them from the plant as soon as practical. Seed heads take energy from the developing leaves and stalks. If seed head production is prolific, it is an indicator that the plant is crowded and perhaps starved for nutrients. Divide and separate these plants in early spring, and more vigorous leaf and stalk growth will occur.

If you have ever questioned how good rhubarb can be, you will have to try one of my favorite desserts.

Rhubarb Bars with Meringue Topping

Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees F.

Mix together:

¼ cups sugar

1 ½ cups flour

½ cup butter

Pat into a 9 x13-inch pan. Bake 8-10 minutes. Cool.

Sprinkle 3 cups of finely chopped rhubarb over crust.

Beat 3 egg yolks (save the whites).

Add:

1 cup sugar

2 Tbsp Flour

½ tsp salt

½ cup Carnation condensed milk

Pour over rhubarb and bake for 45 minutes.

Beat together until stiff peaks form:

3 egg whites

½ cup sugar

1 tsp vanilla

Spread over rhubarb bars and bake 15 minutes or until meringue is brown.

Now enjoy!

From the kitchen of K. Stingl

Story provided for one-time use with permission.

Copyright: Bob Olen and The Senior Reporter.