



Growing Rhubarb

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Rhubarb Lives a Long Time

Rhubarb is a long-lived, large tough perennial hardy to zone 1 or 2 and should be grown in every garden. Also rhubarb makes a lovely large-leaved ornamental for full sun especially if the flower stalks are not removed.

Soil Preparation

Rhubarb needs to be planted in full sun or fertile moist well-drained slightly acidic soil with lots of compost or rotted manure added before planting. The plants are very large. 3 feet tall, 4-5 feet wide, so choose the location carefully.

When to Plant

Spring planting is the best as soon as the soil can be worked before the rhubarb buds start to grow. Rhubarb is propagated by division from crowns or segments of the parent plant including the root. Seed seldom comes true to type and is much slower to reach harvestable size.

Varieties

'Canada Red' from Veseys or 'Macdonald' from Dominion are good choices. Other good varieties worth the search are 'Cherry Red', 'Honey Red', 'Valentine', 'Tilden' and 'German Wine'. If you have a friend or relative with a super variety growing in their garden, ask if you can have some crowns. It may need dividing anyway.

How to Plant

Choose crowns that are firm, free from rot and have two or more rounded reddish buds. Three to five plants provide ample fresh and frozen rhubarb for a family of four. Dig a hole 1 ½ - 3 feet deep and 2 feet in diameter. Add a 6 inch layer of compost or well-rotted manure to the hole. Fill with mixture of soil and compost leaving a depression for the crowns. Set crowns in hole and cover the buds with 1-2 inches of soil. Space plants 4 feet apart. Water well and mulch with compost or rotted manure to a depth of 6 inches leaving space in the centre so the crown is uncovered. Remember that rhubarb is a long lived plant, up to 15 or more years, so good soil preparation is necessary.

Growing

Remove flower stalks as they appear and keep soil moist with regular watering. In fall, remove dead leaves and stalks to prevent disease and pest problems. In late fall just before freeze up apply a 4-5 inch mulch of rotted manure or compost around each plant and 1 inch over the crown.

Harvesting

Do not harvest any stalks the first year. This allows the plant to focus its energy on developing a strong root system. Only the leaf stalks (petioles) which can be pink, red or green can be eaten. Rhubarb leaves contain oxalic acid which is toxic. During the second year, harvest a few stalks during the first two weeks of the season. Following years continue harvesting for 8-10 weeks and always remove flower stalks unless you are growing it as an ornamental. Never take more than one third of the mature stalks from the plant at each picking. Choose stalks about 1 foot long. Grasp stalk in hand close to the soil and then twist the stalk while pulling up. Do not cut off the stalks with a knife since this leaves stubs which may lead to rot. Compost rhubarb leaves by putting them on the ground around the plant.

Storage

Clean rhubarb stalks but don't wash and store in the refrigerator. If stalks are fully mature when picked they should keep for 3-4 days. Rhubarb can also be stored in the freezer and used throughout the year. Cut stalks into 1 inch pieces and put into airtight freezer containers or bags in recipe sized portions.

Problems

Rhubarb is not bothered by many insects or diseases. If planted in poor draining soil it might suffer from crown rot. If this happens the only solution is to remove the sick plant.

If your plant starts producing small stalks, the crown needs dividing. Do this in early spring before shoots emerge. Dig up the crown and using a spade divide the crown into pieces making sure each piece has roots and at least two buds. Replant as you would a new crown.

Learn more about rhubarb on [Wikipedia >](#)