

RHUBARB

Although rhubarb is generally classified as a vegetable, its long, red, tart flavoured stalks are traditionally used as a fruit in pies, cobblers, jams and jellies, or simply stewed and served as a compote. Rhubarb lovers will want to allot space for this vegetable, whose foliage is as attractive as the stems are tasty.

CULTIVATION

Rhubarb is a long-lived perennial plant, and its cultivation is similar in many respects to that of asparagus. Like asparagus, rhubarb is planted in beds that require a lot of preparation, but once the plants are established, they need minimum care and will produce for many years. Like asparagus, rhubarb needs a dormant period and grows best in areas where winters are cold enough to freeze the ground to a depth of at least 2 - 3". Rhubarb is seldom started from seeds. Instead, it is propagated by planting 'crowns'; root divisions that carry the buds from which new plants will grow. Rhubarb crowns can be ordered from seed catalog companies, or you can buy the juvenile plants here in spring.

LOCATION

Rhubarb, like asparagus, grows well in almost any type of soil, but it is a heavy feeder and should not be planted in poor soil unless you are able to add copious quantities of organic material and fertilizer. Rhubarb is a perennial and should be given an isolated spot in your vegetable garden to grow. An ideal location would be in a corner, or in an area of the garden where it will not interfere with, or be damaged by, your work on annual crops.

HOW TO GROW RHUBARB

Rhubarb plants need well-drained, fertile soil, and the ground has to be worked quite deeply. You won't need to dig a row or trench, only a hole for planting each crown. In spring dig the holes 2' deep and 2' wide, and space them 3' apart in all directions. Fill the bottom of each with a 6" layer of compost or manure. Mix the soil you have dug up with an equal amount of compost or manure, and add a 1/3-cup of 7-7-7 All Purpose fertilizer. Fill the hole with the mixture to a depth of 1'. Place one rhubarb crown in each hole so that the top, where the plant buds are located, sits 3 - 4" below the soil surface. Tamp the soil firmly around the roots and fill each hole with the compost and topsoil mixture until level with the surrounding soil.

When the first growth appears (subsequently each spring), spread 3/4 cup ready to use Garden Food 7-14-7 fertilizer evenly around the shoots, and scratch it into the soil with a hand cultivator. Maintain a permanent mulch around each plant to help keep the soil moist and to prevent winter frost from setting in too hard around the roots. Remove the mulch before fertilizing, and afterward push it back in place.

HARVEST

Wait until the second growing season to harvest and when rhubarb stalks are 12" or taller. If your plants are of mature size, harvest a few stalks in late spring the second year after planting. Beginning in the third year, harvest about half the stalks, leaving the thinner stems, which will grow and help to nourish the roots. Harvest the rhubarb when a red blush appears on the outer stalks. Hold the leafstalks near the base and twist, snapping them off. Do not use a knife, which could slip and sever the growing point. Harvest sparingly so that you don't shock the plant, discontinue when you have taken about half the new growth. It is suggested not to continue harvesting past late July, due to the coarse texture of the remaining stems and the plant has opportunity to recover. Its leaves ARE POSIONOUS WHEN EATEN, trim off and discard. Rhubarb plants also produce seed stalks, which if allowed to flower, will reduce the production of edible stalks. So cut off seed stalks as soon as you see them.

FORCING RHUBARB IN WINTER

If you would like to enjoy rhubarb in winter, try this easy forcing method: In the fall, after the tops have died down, dig up a whole plant and place it in a tub 18" in diameter, filled with topsoil, compost and manure. Leave the tub outside for several weeks in freezing weather, and then move to a dark, cool place. Keep the soil moist. About a month before you plan to harvest, move the tub into a warm area 60F or 16C is best, still in the dark, if possible. The dormant root will begin to sprout, and you can harvest when the stalks are about 10" long.

After several years, rhubarb plants tend to become crowded and the stalks grow noticeably thinner. At this point, dig up the plants and divide their roots. Do this in the spring when the new shoots are just beginning to emerge, or in early fall. Cut the roots into several parts, each of which should have one to three buds. Treat these sections as though they were new crowns, and plant them in another part of your garden. If you plant the crowns in the fall, mulch heavily and water in well.