

# Growing Rhubarb



## Quick Facts. . .

- Rhubarb is a cool season, perennial plant that is winter hardy & resistant to drought.
- Its crop is produced from crowns consisting of fleshy rhizomes and buds.
- Once planted, rhubarb plantings remain productive for 8 to 15 years.
- Rhubarb stalks are edible, but their leaves are poisonous.

**Planting** Plant rhubarb roots in early spring, spaced 1 to 2 feet apart. Mature plants will become 4 feet in diameter and 3 feet tall. Plant the roots with the crown bud 2 inches below the surface of the soil. The hole for the crown should be dug extra large and should be amended with compost in a ratio of 1 part compost to 2 parts original soil—good drainage is essential when growing rhubarb. Add super phosphate or bone meal to the hole when planting to encourage root growth. Firm the soil around the roots but keep it loose over the buds. Water the crowns well after planting.

**Harvesting** Rhubarb is a wonderful vegetable, and an old time favorite, but you must be careful not to eat the leaves—they are poisonous! The stalks are the only edible part of the plant. During the first year of planting, the stalks should not be picked, because food from the leaves is needed to nourish the roots for the next year's growth. One light picking may be taken during the second year if the plants are vigorous, and in the third year, the entire plant may be harvested. When harvesting rhubarb, the first step is to cut the stalks at the soil line or simply pull them out individually. All of the stalks of a plant may be harvested at one time, or pulled out selectively over a 4-6 week period. After the stalks are cut, remove the leaves and discard.

Rhubarb hit by a frost or freeze can still be eaten provided the stalks are still firm and upright. Leaf injury may be noticeable with some brown or black discoloration on the edges. If the stems appear soft and mushy, do not eat them. Severe cold injury may cause the oxalic acid crystals in the leaves to migrate to the stalks increasing the likelihood of poisoning problems. If in doubt about the safety of eating the stalks, don't. Cut those stalks off and compost them. Allow new stalks to develop before eating.

**Culture** The quality of the crop harvested depends to a large extent on the care and fertilization received. Gardeners should give each plant a dose of a balanced fertilizer each spring, applied in a circle around the plant when growth starts. Fertilize each year and cultivate shallowly as often as necessary to remove weeds.

Rhubarb plants will occasionally send up seed stalks with flowers in the middle of the plants. Flowering will reduce the vigor of the plant by wasting energy needed for the stalk production on these flowers. The flower and seed stalks should be cut out as soon as they start forming. To maintain the health of your rhubarb, established clumps will have to be trimmed every 4 to 5 years or when the stalks get small and spindly or when the crown is visibly crowded. Dig around and trim the crown down to 4 or 5 buds. You can also use this opportunity to divide your plant into more plants.

**Preparation for winter** Rhubarb tolerates very cold weather (-20F) very well, but a little protection is necessary. Collect the last few stalks after the first hard frost and throw them on the compost pile. Then spread a layer (2-3") of mulch to prevent winter winds from drying out your roots.

