

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

GROWING RHUBARB



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Master Gardener

Question: My grandmother used to make the most delicious rhubarb pies. I would love to grow my own rhubarb, so how do I go about that?

Answer: For a perfect balance of sweetness and tartness in pies, it's hard to beat rhubarb for sheer deliciousness. Not only can rhubarb be used in cakes, syrups, muffins, jams and sauces, but its leaves and colorful stalks add interest and beauty to a landscape.

Rhubarb, a member of the buckwheat family, is very easy to grow. It requires full sun at least six hours of the day, a rich, loamy soil with good drainage and a pH of 6.0-6.8 and space to grow.

Mature rhubarb plants can easily reach a height of 3 feet and spread to 3 feet wide, so find a spot on your garden or landscape large enough to accommodate it and where it can find a permanent home since it comes back every year.

If limited for space, consider growing rhubarb in a large container such as a half wine barrel.

Originally from China and Russia where natives used it to treat malaria, constipation and other ailments, it was introduced to Europe in the 13th century by Marco Polo. By the 18th century it was a popular pie filling in Europe. Interestingly, it was Ben Franklin who brought rhubarb to the New World, and its popularity has never waned.

Oregon and Washington are among the top producing areas of rhubarb in America, because of their suitable climates, with more than 650 acres in production.

The underground portion of rhubarb is a large, woody rhizome with fibrous roots. The broad, green leaves are actually toxic to humans and animals due to the high concentration of oxalic acid. Though considered deer-resistant, I have known deer to browse on the leaves, so your plant may need to be protected from Bambi.

The edible portion, of course, is the red or green leaf stalk or petiole which grows from buds found on the crown near the surface of the soil. These rhubarb stalks are high in vitamins K and C, manganese, potassium, calcium and dietary fiber. Generally, the deeper red the stalk, the less tart it will be.

Seed stalks often emerge or "bolt"



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Rhubarb is high in vitamins K and C, manganese, potassium, calcium and dietary fiber. The deep red stalk is generally less tart than its green portions.

from the crowns of the plant as a result of age or environmental stress such as high heat, drought or low soil fertility. When these seed stalks emerge, cut them off before they form clusters of white or pink flowers as they take energy from the plant and possibly reduce bud formation for the next growing season.

There are over 60 species of rhubarb, the culinary types (*Rheum x hybridum*) such as crimson cherry, crimson red, valentine, Canada red and MacDonald being the most popular.

March and April are the best times to plant rhubarb. You can find rhizomes in garden stores, catalogues or nurseries, or if you know someone who has a plant, you can divide and plant the crown division.

Prepare your soil by amending it deeply with compost and/or aged manure. The bud of the rhubarb plant should be about half an inch below the soil's surface. Tamp down and water thoroughly after planting. Rhubarb is a heavy feeder and needs at least one inch of water per week, so be sure and provide it with fertilizer annually and regular watering.

A well-draining soil ensures that root rot does not occur. Mulching with clean straw or other light organic material helps reduce evaporation and keeps the soil temperature more consistent. Mulch under the leaves, but not over the plant crown.

Do not harvest stalks the first year. The second year harvest only three or four stalks per plant. Afterwards, leave a half dozen stalks on the plant at all times. Do not use a knife to harvest the

stalks since that will encourage crown rot. Instead grasp them down near the crown, giving the stalk a slight twist and sideways pull, being careful not to injure the primary bud.

Cut off the toxic leaf blade right after harvesting.

Stalks can be refrigerated in plastic bags and used within a week or you can freeze slices in sealed freezer bags for up to a year.

A normal harvest season lasts about eight weeks, starting in May and again in early to mid-July. As the plant starts to become dormant in August and September, leave the plant alone as the roots begin to store food reserves for next year.

Productivity declines after five to six years, at which time it's time to divide, replant or share some with a neighbor. This is best done in the

dormant season. The parent crown should be left with three to five buds once fully divided.

Rhubarb does not attract many pests in Oregon. Keeping weeds away from the plant is very important to avoid competition for water and nutrients.

Rhubarb is a nutritious and easy-to-grow vegetable that can continue to be a ready source for that wonderful tart flavor enjoyed by generations of home gardeners.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



Rhubarb plants begin to bolt due to age or environmental stresses. Cut these seed stalks before they form clusters of white or pink flowers.

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