

Growing rhubarb in our valley

Question: What can you tell me about growing rhubarb in the Umpqua Valley?

Answer: Rhubarb is a popular early, cool-season perennial vegetable that makes a great addition to your edible landscape. It is known botanically as *Rheum rhabarbarum* and is a member of the buckwheat family.

It is big leaved and often brightly colored with long stalks. The leaf stalk has a delicious, tart flavor that is typically used in sauces, jams and pies. While the leaves offer textural beauty, they're not part of the harvest package. The leaves are highly oxalic and considered poisonous.

When growing rhubarb, harvest the stems, then remove the leaves and add them to the compost pile. A mature rhubarb plant can easily reach a height of 3 feet. The underground portion of rhubarb is a large, woody rhizome with fibrous roots.

Rhubarb originally came from China and Russia, where the fleshy roots were used medicinally. It was introduced to Europe in the early 1600's and became a commonly used vegetable in America early in the 18th century. Washington and Oregon are among the top-producing areas in the U.S.

Rhubarb is very hardy. The leaves can withstand temperatures as low as 35°F without damage, and the woody rhizomes and crown will stay unharmed in frozen soil. Rhubarb prefers an open, sunny place with a rich, well-drained, loamy soil.

For established plants, add a layer of compost 2-3 inches thick and some all-purpose fertilizer each spring to provide a continuous source of nutrients. New plantings can be done through crown divisions or purchasing rhizomes with roots through your local nursery.

Vegetative propagation by crown division is the recommended method of rhubarb propagation. Large vegetative buds are found on the upper portion of the crowns.

Rhubarb should be divided around the fifth or sixth year after planting. Divide the crowns when the plants are dormant. You can cut each crown into several pieces, each with at least one large bud on



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Chris Rusch
Ask a Master Gardener

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When preparing the planting hole, remember that this is a perennial plant that will grow for many years in the same spot. So dig a deep, wide hole (18 inches deep and 18-24 inches wide) and fill it with a 50:50 mix of compost and good garden soil.

Add a cup or two of all-purpose fertilizer and then place the roots in the hole making sure that the buds end up 1-2 inches below the soil surface. Rhizomes should be placed just below the soil surface. Spacing between plants should be 3 feet apart.

It is important to keep rhubarb plants well-watered for the first year or two, throughout the growing season. Mulch will help to minimize water loss and maintain a more consistent moisture level. As summer heat arrives, mulch plants with a 2-inch-thick layer of mulch,

such as compost or straw. Replenish mulch throughout the growing season as needed to maintain the 2-inch thickness.

There are over 60 species of rhubarb. Many of these are culinary types. The leading variety for outdoor production is Crimson Cherry, also known as Crimson Cherry or Crimson Red. Both are grown for fresh market and processing; it's a vigorously growing variety that produces bright red stalks. Ornamental rhubarb has deep red foliage and is beautiful in the landscape, but the stalks are not edible.

Wait until at least the second year after planting to harvest your first stalks. Choose stems that are 12-18 inches long and reddish in color. Grasp the stalk near the base and pull it upwards, twisting the stem as you pull. You can also use a sharp knife to slice stems from the plant. Cut as close to the crown as possible without damaging the crown buds.

Rhubarb is harvested May through July. Rhubarb should be allowed to regrow from late July onward without being harvested. These food reserves will provide nourishment for the following spring.



While the big leaves of the rhubarb plant offer textural beauty, they are highly oxalic and considered poisonous.

Early spring stems offer the most flavor and tenderness; they're ideal for pies. Stems harvested later in the season tend to be tougher, so reserve them for stewing, sauces, or jams. The number of years you may harvest your rhubarb plant depends on a number of factors, but usually productivity declines after five or six years, and then it's time to divide, replant or both.

Rhubarb is a nutritious, easy-to-grow vegetable that can readily be part of a backyard garden. Its large leaves and colorful stalks make it a great addition to the ornamental garden as well.

Be sure to register for the OSU Extension and Master Gardener **SPRING INTO GARDENING** event scheduled for March 12. Visit our website at bit.ly/33k1QGp.

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 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.