

RHUBARB CULTURE

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Rhubarb is a rather unique crop. The edible part of this vegetable is a large succulent petiole, or stalk of a leaf. And yet, it is used more like a fruit in making pie and other types of desserts. In fact, it is commonly called the pie plant.

Although rhubarb is not a major fresh market vegetable, about 24 million pounds are produced each year in the U.S. It is an easy crop to grow because it usually is not seriously damaged by insects or diseases.

Culture and Varieties

Rhubarb is a perennial plant which originated in the colder parts of Asia, probably Siberia. This crop tolerates severe cold in winter, and dry weather in summer. It grows well in the colder parts of Virginia, but is not adapted to the warmer coastal areas.

The MacDonald and Valentine varieties of rhubarb have desirable red colored petioles. Victoria is an old standard variety with green stalks shaded with red. All varieties develop a more intense red color when grown under cool climatic conditions.

Like many other perennial crops, rhubarb does not come true to name from seeds. The plant is propagated by dividing the crown or clump. The best divisions for planting are those which have a large piece of the fleshy storage root, and a prominent bud.

A well drained fertile loam soil with a high content of organic matter and pH 6.5 is best for rhubarb. Plant the divisions three feet apart, in rows four feet apart, and cover with three inches of soil. The planting may be done about a month before the average last frost date in the spring, or in the autumn a few weeks after the first frost has killed the foliage.

Your rhubarb crop needs liberal amounts of manure or chemical fertilizer to promote vigorous growth. Apply eight pounds of 5-10-5 per 100 feet of row before growth starts in the spring. Broadcast the fertilizer over the entire space between the rows and cultivate into the top two inches of soil.

This fertilizer application is equivalent to about 900 pounds per acre. On poor soils the amount should be increased 50 percent.

Harvesting

The leaves of rhubarb should not be harvested during the first year after it is planted, and only a few should be pulled during the second summer. After the plants become well established, leaves may be removed for about two months each spring.

Rhubarb is easy to harvest by pulling the leaves to one side to detach them from the crown. Cut off the leaf blade leaving one-fourth inch to prevent splitting of the petiole.

Rhubarb wilts quite rapidly when held under room temperature conditions. It will retain it's good fresh edible quality for 3 or 4 weeks under refrigeration at 32° F.

A healthy planting of rhubarb will continue to produce good crops for six or eight years. The petioles may become small and spindly when the plants are ten or twelve years old. The crown should then be divided and replanted in a new location.

Culinary Use

Only the petiole or stalk of the rhubarb leaf should be eaten. The blade has a high content of oxalic acid, and may be quite poisonous.

The high acid content and unusual flavor influence the use of rhubarb in the diet. It is served primarily as dessert in the form of pie, tarts, sauce, or pudding. It may also be used for jam or jelly, and the cooked sweetened juice is refreshing as a chilled drink.

Rhubarb is quite low in calories, but desserts made from it may have high energy value because of the sugar used in their preparation. It supplies only moderate amounts of vitamins A and C.

Forcing Rhubarb

Rhubarb roots may be forced into production during the winter under indoor conditions. This should be done at a temperature between 55 and 60° F. Growth will be slow at a lower temperature, and the stalks will be pale and lack the desired pink color at temperature above 60. The roots must be grown under conditions of high humidity and no light.

Use 2 or 3 year old field grown roots from which no leaves have been harvested. Pack the roots close together surrounded by soil. Moisten as needed to promote vigorous growth. Leaves will be ready to harvest in 4 to 6 weeks when the stalks are 18 inches long. The harvest will continue for 2 or 3 months. By this time the reserve food material is exhausted and the plants usually are discarded. If rhubarb roots are quite scarce and expensive, the plants may be reset in the field, but growth may be quite unsatisfactory.

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